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HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

BY THE

REV. H. B. GEORGE, M.A.

FELLOW OF NEW COLLEGE

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PREFACE

THERE are elaborate books on historical method in various languages; but so far as I know there are none which sum up shortly the different sources of historical information, and the principles that should guide the inquirer in estimating their evidential value, first as enabling him to ascertain the facts, and secondly as guiding him in making the inferences reasonably deducible from those facts. I have endeavoured to do this as briefly as possible, and with no more illustrations than seem necessary to make the principles clear. I have carefully avoided expressing opinions on disputed historical questions, because I think that one great merit of historical study is that it trains men to compare more or less discrepant statements, and to draw their own conclusions, confident or hesitating according to their estimate of the evidence.

H. B. G.

6785

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

PAGE

I. WHAT IS EVIDENCE? 9

A. What is called knowledge is mostly belief, i. e. based on information weighed and accepted.

B. Everything conveying information is evidence.

Chief fields of evidence:

Law, Science, History.

1. Law, its business being to settle disputes, lays down rules.

2. Science and History, seeking to ascertain truth, can accept any testimony, *quantum valeat*, and form tentative judgements.

3. Science seeks general truths and their causes, can verify.

4. History, starting from isolated facts, cannot verify, and can generalize only roughly.

CHAPTER II

II. SOURCES OF HISTORICAL INFORMATION . 29

A. 1. Direct—actual narratives.
documents not narrative.

B. 2. Indirect.

Criteria for trustworthiness of human testimony.

Historical testimony mostly in writing; hence necessity for critical study of text and authorship.

CHAPTER III

PAGE

HISTORICAL NARRATIVES 46

Many narratives are not evidence at all.

Contemporary accounts.

Even these are rarely by actual witnesses.

Written by actors in events.

Memoirs.

Mediaeval chronicles.

Possibly contemporary, but not real witnesses.

Later writers having had access to information no longer extant.

Tradition reduced to writing.

CHAPTER IV

DEFECTS OF HISTORICAL WRITERS . . 79

Inaccuracy of observation.

Bias—a defect only if writer distorts facts.

arising from partiality.

personal interest.

Credulity.

General estimate of a writer's credibility is little guide as to specific statements made by him.

Impossible to insist on testing each separate statement.

CHAPTER V

DOCUMENTS NOT NARRATIVE . . . 102

Inscriptions, modern, ancient, mediaeval.

Laws.

State papers.

Diplomatic correspondence.

Military dispatches.

Private letters and memoirs.

Correspondence of rulers and statesmen.

Pseudonymous writings.

Forgeries.

CHAPTER VI

PAGE
INDIRECT SOURCES OF INFORMATION . . 138

Physical facts
May supplement or correct narrative.
Are not positive evidence in support of it.
Non-historical literature
Valuable for showing general conditions, not for specific facts.
Archaeology.
Chief source of information about prehistoric times.
Legend and myth.

CHAPTER VII

PROBABILITY 160

No definite rules possible about probability.
Improbability a fair reason for doubting statements not thoroughly authenticated.
An element in choosing between conflicting statements.
Real and spurious improbability.
Improbable things do happen.
The argument from silence.
Cumulative evidence, positive and negative.

CHAPTER VIII

SPECIAL SOURCES OF ERROR 182

Modern writers intend to be precise.
Ancient and mediaeval writers were not, and could not be, precise.
The past must not be interpreted by the ideas of a later age.

CHAPTER IX

PAGE

HISTORICAL GENERALIZATIONS . . . 195

Evidence for them practically all in writing,
hence, scanty for ancient and mediaeval times,
plentiful for modern.
Less evidence necessary for customs, &c., than for
single facts.
Historians can only say—cause is calculated to
produce effect.
Post hoc not necessarily *propter hoc*.
Things once done cannot be annulled,
i.e. consequences are permanent.
Causes work simultaneously.
Historical prediction, how far legitimate.
Judgement on historical character.

INDEX OF HISTORICAL ILLUSTRATIONS . 221

CHAPTER I

WHAT IS EVIDENCE?

All the world reads, or is supposed to read, more or less of history, partly in order to get some idea how the political and social conditions of the world as we know it have grown up, more perhaps for the aesthetic and moral interest attaching to great men and great events. Even for the sake of this superficial acquaintance with the past, it is worth while to inquire by what means history is constructed. The most casual reader can hardly fail to notice that there is sure to be more or less of discrepancy between any two narratives of the same events, differences perhaps in the statement of facts, certainly in estimates of character: and it is neither difficult nor unprofitable to discover why this so frequently happens. Those who take history more in earnest, studying it for the sake of the mental training derivable from it, *a fortiori* those who aspire to extend the boundaries of historical learning, will fail of their purpose unless they begin by realizing what historical knowledge is, whence it is derived, and how far it differs from other branches of human knowledge.

Most part of what is commonly spoken of as knowledge is, strictly speaking, belief. That is to say, whatever the testimony of our own senses may contribute, there is much that comes to us on the testimony of others, perhaps stored in our memory, perhaps newly set before us. Our minds form judgement as best they can as to the import of what is before them: and the resulting conclusion, however confidently formed and firmly held, is properly belief and not knowledge. We may be said to know that it is raining, if we see and feel the falling rain: but it is seldom strictly accurate to say that we *know* the most notorious public event, unhesitating as our belief may be. We saw with our own eyes (say) the king's coronation procession, and heard the bells ringing: but it is on inference from the testimony of others that we believe the ceremony to have been duly completed, and that the bell-ringing was in honour of the event. Most of the historical information which most people possess is even less than this: it is mere belief, resting on no judgement at all, other than the assumption that other people are telling the truth. History could not in fact be studied unless this assumption were frequently made, just as daily life would be impossible unless we acted on what other people say, without taking the trouble to verify by means of our own senses everything that we are told. Our informants may be inaccurate observers

of things which come within the cognizance of their senses, or they may be prejudiced in their judgement: but prima facie one assumes, until cause is shown to the contrary, that they are telling us what they believe to be true, and also that there is a fairly strong presumption in favour of its being true. It is perhaps not easy to determine why men do in fact tend to believe what other people say. What has been somewhat clumsily called the physical sanction, that it involves a mental effort to invent, and that therefore men in general tend to follow the less troublesome course of repeating what they remember, no doubt holds good in a certain fashion, though it is obviously no safeguard against falsehood whenever men have an interest in concealing or perverting the truth. In the western world, largely through the influence of Christianity, there is more or less of a social stigma on untruthfulness, but it is certainly not universal or instinctive among mankind. One way or another, we feel ourselves justified in presuming that what we hear or read is likely to be true, and this suffices not only for the ordinary business of life, but as a basis for acquiring much of our knowledge. But if we would go any further in historical study than merely storing up in our memory what is recorded as fact, without ever asking ourselves on what authority the statements are made which we are asked to accept as true,

we must have some knowledge of the sources from which what is presented to us as history is derived, some criteria of credibility. No intelligent appreciation of history, and *a fortiori* no investigation of an historical question, is possible without some grasp of the principles of evidence.

For historical purposes we can afford to ignore all metaphysical questions as to the origin of our knowledge, or the nature of consciousness. We are dealing altogether with information derived in the strictest sense from outside our own minds. The same document, say a newspaper report, is read by many different persons, and each judges of its import in his own way. One may believe it unreservedly, another may see reasons for doubting its accuracy, another may discredit it altogether. But this does not alter the fact that all, though with different results, have had the same document before them. Rather is it to be noted as an ultimate fact that each mind must judge for itself. The most stanch believer cannot do more than affirm that the evidence satisfies himself, and that consequently he wonders at his neighbour not taking the same view. The other man can only say that the evidence is to his judgement untrustworthy, and that therefore he deems belief to be mistaken. It is perfectly reasonable, even necessary, for the historian to state the grounds on which he has

formed a given opinion, and to argue that they are sufficient to justify it. It is probable that these reasons will convince others also: it is even probable that many will be content to believe on the authority of the historian: but if they do not, there is no more to be said. Nothing in the nature of scientific demonstration is from the nature of the case available. *A* makes one inference from the materials, *B* makes another, and all that a third person can say is—I agree with *A* or with *B*; the reasons which he says have determined his judgement seem to me cogent, the reasons for a different view seem to me weak.

For somewhat similar reasons we need concern ourselves little with formal logic. History deals in the first instance with statements of single facts: and the rules which logic lays down as to the import of general propositions, universal or particular, affirmative or negative, are therefore not required. Logic says that a given conclusion follows if certain premisses are true: history is mainly concerned with inquiring whether they are true. Even when the historian proceeds to generalize, he can only do so, as will appear more fully hereafter, in a somewhat vague and tentative way. He cannot get beyond the opinion that, certain things having happened, they were probably due to certain causes. For though he can easily perceive that these causes

were at work, he cannot measure what amount of influence was due to them, what amount to other causes operating simultaneously. The logical rules of induction, most useful for guiding research into natural phenomena, are of little use to the historian who is dealing with the great complexities of human action and nature. He may with advantage bear in mind the logical rule that a general conclusion cannot properly be based upon too few instances. But he cannot call up instances at will: he can only deal with those that he has, and note that the inference which they suggest to his mind must not be stated too confidently.

When we say that a given statement is evidence, what do we mean? Simply that on the assumption that it is true, an inference follows: it only becomes evidence if, and so far as, it is used as the basis for an inference. The inference may be of any kind, from the simplest and most direct, to something remote: it may be cogent, or merely suggesting a presumption, or it may be entirely baseless. Whatever the value or the nature of the inference, the statement which gives occasion for it is, to the mind of the hearer, evidence. A friend tells me that he has just seen *X* in the street: this is to me evidence that *X* actually was there. It may turn out that my friend mistook some one else for *X*, but his statement to me is still evidence, even

though it proves false. There may, or may not, be a further inference suggested to my mind, as that *X*, whom I recently heard of as confined to his bed, cannot really have been seriously ill, or that something has occurred to make *X* put off a journey which I knew he intended. Anyhow it is on my friend's evidence that I believe the bare fact that *X* was in the street. Or again, the newspapers, which are tacitly assumed to give such information correctly, contain a royal proclamation dated from Buckingham Palace dissolving Parliament. This is evidence from which I infer that the king, of whose movements I know nothing, is in London. My inference may prove to have been hastily drawn, the king having merely passed through London yesterday: but whatever the worth of my judgement, the newspaper statement formed the evidence on which I based it. In other cases more than one piece of evidence may have to be considered simultaneously. I hear accounts of an incident from two different persons, each of whom describes what he saw, or thinks he saw. Here is evidence from which I infer as best I can, it being a question no longer of believing or not believing a single statement, but of comparing two more or less discrepant statements by whatever light I can bring to bear on the matter.

The same holds good as to things of which our own

senses take cognizance, though there the underlying presumption is not that our informant is speaking the truth, but that our senses are capable of correct observation; and it may possibly turn out that our senses were deceived. And of what our senses have told us we may in our turn become witnesses, or we may add evidence derived from the statements of others to the conclusions of our own senses, in order to deduce an inference. I find a man lying unconscious at the foot of a cliff. This is for me evidence on which I base the inference that he has fallen over. And when I tell others, my statement is for them evidence from which they will infer, first that I did so find him (always on the assumption that they believe me): and they will probably go on to draw the same inference with me as to how he came there. Or again, a doctor is called to attend a dying man: he observes certain symptoms, and he also hears what the friends tell about things that happened before his arrival. What he has seen, and what he has heard and believed, form the evidence on which he bases his inference that the patient is dying (say) from the effects of a certain poison. The mere fact of his using these things as grounds for his inference makes them for the time being evidence, even should it turn out afterwards that the inference was wrong.

In fact, every man, who is not totally indifferent

to current events, does practise for himself daily, in a haphazard way, what the historian does methodically. He reads in the newspapers eyewitness narratives which are believed by the writer to be correct, except in the comparatively rare instances where things are deliberately misrepresented: and even such misrepresentations are rather of the import than of the facts themselves. If the matter is of public importance, there will be comments, in government announcements, parliamentary debates, leading articles, and so forth. From this possibly incoherent mass of materials the 'man in the street' derives his impressions, more or less sound according to his opportunities, but scarcely any of them obtained in any real sense at first hand. He may or may not, as time goes on, correct his first notions by reading authors who bring a trained historical judgement to bear. If his memory be sufficiently retentive to recall his original impressions, he will realize that the historian's task, of sifting masses of more or less discrepant evidence, and basing on them coherent conclusions, is no light one.

Half the actions of our lives are in fact done upon evidence, though in many cases the process of judgement is almost unconscious, or the matter is so trifling that it signifies little whether the evidence on which we act is or is not misleading. Of course it is otherwise with serious studies, or when our

interests are really involved. Then it becomes important to discriminate, and to take care that the evidence on which we found our inferences is correctly stated and rightly understood. And history is of all studies that in which it is most necessary to get a firm grasp of principles of evidence, because it is that in which, as will appear later, the largest use is made, and properly, indeed necessarily made, of inconclusive evidence.

The functions of evidence in relation to history, and the necessity for a clear understanding of how evidence is to be treated, may best be seen by a comparison with two other fields in which evidence plays an equally important part, law and science.

Law differs fundamentally from history and natural science, as to the end which it has in view, when it employs evidence. The business of a law court is to terminate disputes, and disputes of a particular kind, those which arise when one of two parties makes a claim or an accusation against the other. It seeks to discover the truth in order that it may give a decision as between the parties: it concerns itself with nothing which is not relevant to that issue. Science and history have no such practical end in view: their immediate purpose is merely to sift the evidence in order to ascertain the truth.

Hence arise two important differences in procedure.

1. Law cannot suspend judgement without failing to discharge its main duty, that of terminating disputes. And since the aid of the law is invoked by a plaintiff demanding that justice shall be done to him on the strength of certain alleged facts, it is obviously right that the verdict shall be against him if the evidence which he adduces is insufficient to satisfy the court that he is right. The verdict of a law court is merely that the plaintiff has, or has not, made out his case: there is not, and cannot be, any attempt to go deeper.[1] The scientific or historical inquirer, on the other hand, is fully at liberty to suspend judgement. If he thinks that the available evidence points to a given conclusion, but is not sufficient to establish it, he can, with no harm to any one, record his conclusion as provisional or probable, and wait for further evidence. Indeed it is a necessary condition of his investigations being fruitful that he should be ready to do so. *Interest reipublicae finem esse litium*: but it is against the interests of knowledge to put any artificial limits on the search after truth.

2. Law finds it necessary, in view of the practical

[1] So fully is this recognized, that a case involving complicated counter-claims is in England usually referred to arbitration, as being unsuitable to be tried out in court.

nature of its functions, to lay down[1] rules as to evidence, whereas science and history have no such need, they can accept any kind of evidence *quantum valeat*. For instance, the English law does not allow a copy of a document to be given in evidence, unless the absence of the original is satisfactorily explained. It does not allow *A* to give testimony as to what *B* said and did: if *B*'s words or actions are material to the issue before the court, *B* must be called as a witness. The object of such rules is partly to prevent fraud, partly also to expedite the administration of justice, by giving a plaintiff notice as to the nature of the testimony that he must produce, and also by saving the court from wasting its time over listening to irrelevant matter. There can be no motive for adopting any analogous method in dealing with historical or scientific testimony: and in historical investigations especially such restrictions as are mentioned above would in many cases be equivalent to rejecting all the testimony available. On the other hand, the principles underlying the English legal rules are sound, and may be useful guides in other fields of inquiry. For instance, first-hand testimony is obviously more

[1] All legal systems have not the same rules, and it would obviously be out of place here to compare the English with any other: but in all alike the same fundamental principle holds good, that there must be rules, if litigation is to attain its object.

trustworthy prima facie than second-hand, because it entirely excludes one source of error, the chance that the second person may, unintentionally or on purpose, be misrepresenting what he had heard. A man of science may, or may not, be able to repeat for himself the observation or experiment which he hears that some one else has made. An historian may, or may not, be able to consult for himself unpublished documents, the purport of which is declared by some one else. If he cannot, he is less likely to be misled by trusting to a second-hand report than would be the case in a law court, where all sorts of passions and interests may possibly suggest distortion of the truth.

Science and history, though they agree as to the purpose for which they investigate evidence, differ in every other respect except in so far as they are concerned with the credibility of testimony. All inquiries, whatever the subject, have to test the specific statements, and estimate the general value, of their witnesses on the same principles. A given man is or is not honest, or accurate in observing, or precise in his language, or skilful in drawing inferences. The moral and intellectual qualities involved are the same whether he is testifying about natural phenomena or about human actions, though obviously there are many more influences which may operate to warp a witness's judgement in

respect of the latter than are likely to be felt in dealing with the former. Apart from this consideration, which applies more or less to every kind of information which we receive at second hand, science and history differ profoundly—

(1) As to the nature of the evidence with which they deal.

(2) As to their method of treating it.

(3) As to the results at which they aim.

(4) As to the amount of certainty which they may expect to attain.

1. Natural science has as its subject matter the facts of physical nature. It is true that a given individual does in practice found his belief as to the bulk of them on the testimony of previous observers, but they are all verifiable in some form. Moreover the facts are general, not singular. All water, and not merely a particular specimen, boils or freezes when the same conditions are applied. All bodies on the earth's surface are subject to the attraction of its mass. All living organisms of a given species go through the same stages of development. History, on the other hand, deals mainly with human actions, each one of which is done once for all, and cannot be repeated by way of verification. All that history can do is to compare these isolated facts with one another, and form an opinion as to the probability of certain results following from certain antecedents.

For instance, history records a considerable number of instances in which rulers have been assassinated. In most cases this has been done in public, and no reasonable doubt is possible as to the truth of the fact, or the identity of the assassin. But if the historical inquirer attempts to discern the motives for these similar acts, he finds that they vary indefinitely. He cannot possibly discover any general laws, though he can and doubtless will notice vague approximations to such. He will see that the more oppressive a government, the more likely on the whole it is that its chief will some day be assassinated, that the more excitable a race the greater the chance of some one among them sacrificing himself for revenge, or for the supposed advantage of a creed or a party. Nowhere will he find any equivalent to the rule which an engineer can lay down as to the amount of strain under which a given structure will give way.

2. The very essence of scientific investigation is that it seeks to discover the causes of observed phenomena. A hypothesis is framed, and its soundness is tested by repeated observations and experiments. An essential part of the training of a student of science is to learn how to conduct experiments, and though he necessarily takes many things on trust, he probably verifies for himself, deliberately or incidentally, all the facts important to the branch

of science that he is pursuing. Thus there is plenty of machinery for testing a new hypothesis; and if it bears the test it is accepted as sound, and becomes part of the common stock of ascertained knowledge. History has to deal in an entirely different fashion with its materials, which are not facts, but statements. All that it can do is to compare and weigh those statements, and thereupon form a judgement as to whether, and how far, they are true. That judgement may very possibly be so confident that no reasonable man will doubt its correctness, or it may be tentative and conjectural. History, for instance, will affirm as certain that Charles I was executed on January 30, 1649, though it can only guess by whose hand he was beheaded. History on the other hand, while it cannot doubt that Charles's grandmother, Mary Stuart, was accused of complicity in the murder of her husband, can only express an opinion that the evidence points on the whole to the conclusion that she was (or was not) guilty. New information may come to light, and may lead to a reconsideration, even to a reversal, of an historical judgement; but the new one, like the old, is merely belief. The inquirer forms and states his opinion to the best of his ability, but this is all that he can do: he has no machinery available for testing his hypothesis, as the man of science can test his.

Hence it may be safely affirmed that when writers on the methods of historical study talk of reaching scientific certainty as to historical facts, they are simply misusing words. We may have no more doubt in our minds that the battle of Waterloo was fought on a certain day than that the earth is round: but the former we believe, because in our judgement the records of that past event are trustworthy; the latter we can verify for ourselves, assuming that we possess the necessary skill, and therefore may be said to know.

3. The result aimed at in scientific investigations is to establish general propositions. These may be of various kinds. Some may be directly subservient to practical utility, as for instance that iron when converted into steel becomes so much per cent. stronger and more durable. Others may stand of themselves as definite steps of advance in our knowledge of nature, as for instance the discovery of the circulation of the blood, though in fact the knowledge of such general laws may well be of great practical value also. Some have, and some have not, a connexion with other scientific conclusions—they may show for instance that a general law hitherto accepted needs to be modified or should be given a wider scope: but all are in their essence general and not particular. History on the contrary merely seeks to elicit the truth as to specific

facts which are said to have occurred in the past. The generalizations which it can make, however useful it may be for statesmen to bear them in mind, are mere statements of what is likely to happen in the long run. It is known, for instance, that in early Rome there was a sharp separation between patricians and plebeians, and that conflicts followed which resulted in the breaking down of the original caste distinctions. An historian is justified in pointing out that the existence of such a system is likely to lead to such results: but he cannot go further. He cannot say how long such a conflict will be in breaking out, or exactly how it will terminate: he can lay down no such certain rule as an engineer (for instance) can state when he says that a given boiler will explode whenever the pressure of steam within it passes a definite limit.

4. To put the same point in another way, science can aim at certainty, history cannot, in theory at least, go beyond probability. Science can assume the uniformity of physical nature, and this so completely that if a phenomenon is observed which is irreconcilable with a recognized 'law of nature', it will be admitted, as soon as the phenomenon is proved beyond dispute to be a fact, that the formula which has hitherto been accepted needs reconsideration. Nor will the genuine man of science be content until he has discovered a new hypothesis

which will fit the newly observed fact as well as the old ones. History, dealing with human conduct, can make no such assumption. It observes that men are in fact swayed by a variety of motives, some more widely operative than others: and it may assume, without much fear of going wrong, that where all the circumstances are precisely similar, a man will act in a second case just as some one else acted in the first case. Self-interest, or what they deem such, will, it may reasonably be supposed, determine men's conduct in the absence of countervailing influences; and as a matter of fact countervailing influences are often absent. The whole of political economy is based on this assumption: and the rules that it lays down are true and useful, in spite of their not holding good universally. But no rational economist, *a fortiori* no historian, will forget that there are many other motives by which men are swayed, prejudices of race or caste, passions like love or revenge or jealousy, principles based on religious beliefs true or false, such as benevolence and asceticism. It is scarcely possible for the historian to know, though he may have good reason to believe, by what motives a given person was led to do a given action. Still less can he gauge fully the motives which govern masses of men, the reasons which determine the trend of national sentiment or national enter-

prise. He may fairly point out the nature of the geographical environment of a people, the conditions tending to make them amenable or impervious to some new influence, and the results which such things, as far as they are not counteracted, are liable to produce. Such generalizations are among the most interesting and valuable things that an historian can produce : but they are, and must remain, speculations and not certainties.

The position of an historian therefore, in reference to the materials with which he has to deal, differs from that of all other inquirers. He can in the strict sense verify nothing, though there are many things concerning which the volume of testimony is such that no one can hesitate what to believe. He must recognize that there are many other things concerning which the available testimony is scanty or of dubious import ; concerning which therefore he can form but a hesitating judgement. At the same time, since no action follows from his judgement, he is at liberty to form and state it freely, though always with the reservation, tacit or expressed, that his judgement is personal, that the considerations which influence him may have a different force to another mind. He can generalize, he can even predict, but he cannot safely go beyond generalities, because he is dealing with the endless complexities of human nature.

CHAPTER II

SOURCES OF HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The sources of historical information are extremely multifarious, and of very diverse value: but they may be conveniently classed under two heads, direct and indirect. The essence of the former is that the document, whatever its nature, is written in order that it may be believed. The writer may have been ill-informed or ill-judging: he may even be wilfully distorting or disguising the truth: but whatever the actual value of his statements, they are all made with the intention that the reader shall accept them as true. And this holds good whether they are formal historical narratives, or the documents of all kinds, ranging from state records to private letters making casual mention of public matters, which are the raw material out of which histories are constructed.

The indirect sources of historical information, which will be separately discussed later, can only be defined negatively. They comprise everything which, though not primarily intended for that purpose, may yet throw incidental light on historical questions: and there are few departments of learning

of which this does not hold good. The most obvious use of such information is to test the correctness of direct historical statements, which cannot be accepted as true if they conflict with known facts, for instance of time or distance. More important perhaps is the use of indirect information to supply the data from which something can be learned about the history of mankind in times and countries furnishing no written records. And among these indirect sources must be included all mythical and legendary lore—matters which, though the original purpose may have been to preserve the memory of things which were known or believed to have happened, possess none of the characteristics of documentary evidence.

It is doubtless true that none but professed students of history are likely to deal at first hand with the indirect sources of information. The historian, whether he relies on the authority of experts in departments of learning that may supply him with indirect materials, or studies them for himself, cannot perform his task adequately unless he takes full account of them. But the ordinary reader may reasonably expect to find all such matters sufficiently treated in historical works. Nevertheless he cannot appreciate history properly unless he realizes the wide range of subjects with which it is thus connected.

All direct historical information being, as has been said above, the work of men who have set down in writing statements which they desire shall be believed, it becomes necessary to inquire into the trustworthiness of such statements. What are the criteria for determining how far they may be accepted as true? Are the conditions under which historical statements are presented to us in any way exceptional?

The value of all human testimony, whatever the subject with which it deals, whatever the purpose for which it is cited, depends on three independent considerations:

1. What were the witness's means of knowing the truth as to the matter in question?

2. What is his capacity for observing fully and accurately, or judging correctly?

3. How far is he to be trusted to tell the truth without bias?

And it is only if he satisfies all these tests, in the opinion of the person who has to judge, that his testimony is accepted as trustworthy. In a court of justice a witness, from the nature of the case, appears as in some sense a partisan: he is brought there to testify to certain facts which favour (say) the plaintiff's claim or accusation. And he is liable to be cross-examined; that is to say it is the interest of the defendant, who maintains the

opposite view, to minimize the value of testimony given in support of the plaintiff's case, and he is allowed to test it publicly by asking further questions. So far as he can show that the witness is lacking in any of the qualities which make up credibility, he has helped his own cause, it being for the court to say at last what weight it attaches to the statements of the witness. Still more thorough is the testing which can usually be given to any statement about physical facts: for the inquirer can verify in most cases by experiment, or if not, by independent observation. Neither of these processes is in any way applicable to historical evidence. There is the written testimony, of whatever kind it may be; and the historical inquirer has to judge of its value by whatever criteria he can apply.

In the first place it is obvious that the mere fact of things being in writing involves the possibility of alterations. Unless we have in our hands the original actually written by the author, there is always the chance, remote perhaps but still existing, of some incorrectness in the copy. Too much stress can easily be laid on the necessity for criticizing the text, as well as the contents, of historical documents. Textual criticism is certainly a highly technical matter, but fortunately it is not of much importance from the point of view of evidence.

Documents relating to periods since the introduction of printing are, with comparatively few exceptions, printed, which means that no further question can arise about the text—an historical narrative written for publication, or a public document given to the world, is printed in the words which the writer intended to use. The exceptions are state papers, or more private correspondence; if these are at a later date opened to the historical inquirer, this can only take place if the originals, or copies taken under conditions which make them equivalent to originals, have been preserved. Here again there can be no doubt about the correctness of the text, whatever questions may arise as to the contents. For the ancient world, again, the case is simple. A sharp line may be drawn between books, classical or post-classical, and the vast mass of inscriptions. The latter are, from the point of view of the historical student, original documents: they have been copied and published of late years with great care, for the sole purpose of making their contents known. There may be differences of opinion as to the meaning of this or that phrase, there are doubtless many more still to be unearthed: but no reasonable man can doubt, when looking at a volume of (say) the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, that he has the genuine text before his eyes. Of the books, too, the existing manu-

scripts are known. Vast labour has been expended on collating them, and on editing the text at any rate of all which have literary importance; and considering all things, the variations are neither numerous nor important. The doubtful readings are marked in every published copy of Aristotle, or Thucydides, or Tacitus: and it would be difficult to maintain that any question of the slightest historical importance turns on choosing between one version and another. Doubtless the Byzantine historians, for instance, have not been studied with the same zeal as the classics, but enough labour has been bestowed on them to make it reasonably certain that the texts were correctly printed. As to mediaeval documents, the chronicles have many of them been published in recent times with as careful editing as the ancient inscriptions. No one will hesitate to trust the text of the books contained in the Rolls series, for instance, or in the *Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum*. There may be others as yet unpublished, but it is highly improbable that they should have been copied repeatedly like Virgil or Sophocles, with possibilities of error in transcription each time. Such of the non-narrative documents as have been published have probably all received equally careful editing: and of the remainder, doubtless large in one way or another, the student who is led to consult them will most

likely have originals to deal with, or at worst single copies which have taken the place of the originals. Hence though it is right that the historical inquirer should realize that the critical investigation of texts is a troublesome thing, for which it is necessary to possess knowledge of very various kinds, he need not possess that knowledge for himself, unless he is devoting himself to an historical period or subject which depends on documents as yet unpublished. Moreover he can always bear in mind that the worst evil which uncertainties can inflict is to cause some little doubt as to the cogency of the conclusions drawn from the documents as they stand; and to doubts of this nature he must necessarily be accustomed.

No one of course can pretend to study an historical document unless he fully understands the language in which it is written: but a further piece of caution is necessary in dealing with mediaeval history. The Latin habitually employed for literary purposes, though modified in various ways from its classical form, was still the vernacular tongue of a bygone age. A chronicler used whatever word he could find to describe a new thing, and it might or might not be appropriate. Hence it is necessary to be on one's guard against assuming that the mediaeval significance was identical with that which the word would have had in Cicero or Livy. An

instance or two may be useful. *Dux* was a suitable Latin equivalent for the *heretoga*, the military chief over one of the great divisions of the mediaeval Empire. *Comes*, on the other hand, gave no indication of the real position of a *graf*, the civil representative of the crown. *Beneficium* again, a classical word without any technical significance, was used to mean a fief, something held of a feudal superior, and involving reciprocal duties to him: and on one famous occasion[1] this gave rise to much ill feeling.

In relation to all historical documents earlier than the introduction of printing, a further subsidiary question may arise—is it an original, or a copy? An expert will probably have no hesitation in passing a confident judgement as to the period to which the handwriting belongs, will say for instance that the actual manuscript before his eyes must have been written in the thirteenth century, and cannot there-

[1] At the Diet of Besançon the papal legate, in assuring Frederick Barbarossa of the Pope's goodwill towards the man on whose head he had recently placed the imperial crown, went on to say that the Pope would not repent of his action, even if he had conferred *maiora beneficia*. Whether the ambiguous word was used purposely or not may be doubtful. Certain it is that the German nobles resented what they interpreted as a claim that the Pope was the Emperor's feudal superior. Certainly also such a claim had been made before, and was made afterwards, and was in fact a great source of hostility between the Papacy and the Hohenstaufen emperors.

fore be the autograph of a ninth-century scribe. This, however, is of little historical, or even literary importance. All that can be said is that the longer the interval between the original composition and the date of the manuscript in question, the more time there has been for errors to creep into the text in cases where there have been repeated copyings. Such errors, however, as has already been said, are hardly worth considering if the copying was bona fide, though the character of the handwriting might afford solid reason for rejecting as spurious a document professing to give actual signatures or seals.

The authorship of an historical document, whether it be an actual narrative or of some subsidiary character, may or may not be avowed. In modern times an historical work is written for publication: the author has every motive for giving his name, none for withholding it. As to other documents, it may be admitted that readers do not know the name of the secretary who actually drafted a dispatch, or of the reporter who supplied to a newspaper the account of a debate or a battle. Subsequent ratification, however, is equivalent: the employers by adopting it make themselves responsible for the contents. In earlier times the case was for many reasons different: we know comparatively little as to the actual sources of our information. All that

need be pointed out here is that if a writing be really anonymous, or if the author's name conveys no meaning, the text of the document may possibly furnish some hints for identifying him. Many of the mediaeval chroniclers, for instance, were monks: forms of expression might show the order to which the writer belonged, incidental references might indicate the locality with which he was familiar, or the date at which he wrote. For instance, the chronicle of Baker of Swinbrook, which is of exceptional value for certain aspects of fourteenth-century history, ends with the statement that after the battle of Poictiers the Black Prince began peace negotiations with the French, but that in the course of the next two years nothing was concluded. Seeing that the Treaty of Bretigny followed shortly afterwards, the inference is irresistible that Baker's labours were cut short, probably by death, during the interval. And seeing that he specifically mentions in its proper place the person from whom he derived certain details about the fall of Edward II, we cannot doubt that we have in Baker a contemporary in the strictest sense for all, or nearly all, of the fifty odd years covered by his chronicle.

The text of an historical document may also furnish indications that it was not written in the age to which it professes, or is supposed, to belong, or that it is for other reasons to be deemed spurious.

Anachronisms, and errors about facts which must have been notorious to the ostensible author, are obviously conclusive. A mediaeval charter which gives among the persons attesting it one who was dead before the date of the charter is self-condemned. The ingenious people who have professed to discover in Bacon's works, and in other works of his age, a long series of cryptograms, in which Bacon claims to be not only Queen Elizabeth's lawful heir, but also the author of Shakespeare's plays and of much besides, convict themselves of absurdity by putting into Bacon's mouth incidental statements about trifling matters, which were entirely untrue, and about which the truth must have been familiarly known to Bacon. When, however, it is said that a document is spurious because the critic finds it to be wanting in the forms of expression characteristic of the period to which it professes to belong, the question arising is not without complexity. It is only from the study of the extant documents of a particular age that the forms characteristic of them can be discovered. When a new document comes to light, which does not answer to the tests which the critic has thus evolved, there is always the chance that his judgement needs to be reconsidered. His induction may have been faulty, as based upon too few instances: and in proportion as the number of extant docu-

ments is small or large, this is more or less probable, according to familiar principles of logic.

Critical study of the language of a document, again, may disclose evidence that it is not homogeneous, but composed from earlier documents. A familiar instance is the Hebrew text of the Pentateuch, which is pronounced to be a compilation from three distinct documents, varying considerably in date and style. The cogency of conclusions thus reached cannot really be estimated by any but experts in the languages concerned. The historical student, if he is not himself an expert, has only their guidance. He may be able to judge of their arguments, even if he cannot verify the data on which those arguments are founded. And he will do well to remember that it is in human nature that men should be very confident of conclusions reached through their own investigations. At the worst he can suspend judgement, as must be done in many other historical matters.

All these are obviously preliminary considerations : what emerges is a document containing certain historical statements, made by an author whose identity is (or is not) ascertained. It still remains to apply criteria for determining his credibility. Of the three tests mentioned above as applicable to all human testimony, the witness's means of knowing, his capacity for accuracy, his intention

to tell the truth, the first will be most conveniently discussed in the next chapter. As will there appear more fully, historical narrative, in the form in which it reaches the student, is very far from being entirely the direct testimony of witnesses in the strict sense: it may be in very varying degrees of proximity to the events which it records. The defects leading to deliberate or unintentional deviations from the actual truth are also best considered separately.

There are, however, other points, concerned with all forms of testimony, on which a few words must be added. It is commonly, and truly, said of an ordinary witness, say in a court of justice, that there are three possibilities: he may be telling the exact truth, he may be wilfully lying, or he may be mistaken while honestly intending to tell the truth. In the case of historical narratives the two latter are practically merged in one. No such writer will invent a deliberate lie, though he may easily, through bad judgement or bias of some sort, state a rumour as if it were ascertained fact, or impute a given act to the wrong person or the wrong motive. And it is comparatively rarely that the historical student has means of testing the witness which will enable him to go beyond concluding that, the witness having this or that defect, his statements in relation to this or that subject must be accepted

with more or less reserve, so long as he is the only witness under consideration.

It is, however, probably the exception, rather than the rule, that any alleged historical fact depends on the testimony of a single witness. Where there is more than one, again there are three possibilities: the witnesses may agree exactly, they may disagree fundamentally, or they may agree substantially while differing in detail. The first case is of real importance to the historian in one way only: he must bear in mind that all may have derived their information from one source, in which case there is in reality but one witness. Occasionally in a court of justice all the witnesses are in a conspiracy to tell the same lie, for instance to support a false alibi by recounting the details of some meeting fraudulently planned to sustain it. Nothing like this is conceivable in relation to historical testimony: but what is for evidential purposes equivalent may easily happen. Historical writers are not really witnesses of more than a part of what they relate, possibly of none of it: and there is always the chance that when an event is recorded, the details of which cannot from the nature of the case be known to more than very few persons, all the historical narratives of it may be based on the testimony of one of them. It is like what occasionally happens to a scholar engaged on the text of

a classical author. He finds reason to believe that two separate manuscripts are both derived by copying from the same earlier one, in which case they are not two witnesses, but only one, in favour of the particular reading of some disputed text which appears in both.

The second alternative, of historical authorities disagreeing fundamentally, is necessarily dealt with by the general methods employed to test all authorities. The inquirer comes to the conclusion that there are reasons for regarding *A* as generally trustworthy, and therefore inclines to believe him in relation to this or that specific statement, while on similar grounds he tends to disbelieve *B*. Or he may be influenced by indirect evidence, or by considerations of probability, and so be led to prefer the one or the other statement; and the confidence of his belief will be proportioned to these conditions, which obviously may vary greatly.

As to the third case, where authorities agree substantially but differ in detail, no difficulty arises until the inquirer himself goes into detail. It is a familiar experience that no two eyewitnesses of the same incident will relate it independently in precisely the same way: one will have observed this small point, the other that: and it is reasonably held that this indicates bona fides on their part.

For instance, it is an ancient argument in favour of the trustworthiness of the Gospels that, while in substantial accord, they describe certain incidents with different details, thus showing that they are independent narratives. If the inquirer is satisfied that his authorities are telling what they believe to be the truth, small discrepancies between them do not really detract from the value of their testimony as to the substance of the event with which they are dealing. When he attempts to ascertain the details, he must decide as best he can between conflicting versions. Bona fides is of course not identical with accuracy: it only implies that mistakes are not wilful. And there may or may not be separate means available for judging which of two equally honest statements is the more accurate. If there are none, he can only leave the point in doubt, remembering that honest inaccuracy of observation is not only possible, but common. Fortunately it is very rarely that anything of historical importance turns on the question which version of the details of a given fact is correct. Hence the variations in detail, even between genuine eyewitnesses, may usually be treated with equanimity by the historian. For instance, nothing whatever turns on the exact time when the battle of Borodino began, important as the battle itself was, or the historian would despair of getting a clear account. For though all the eye-

witnesses, and those who have written of it are many, speak of a cannon shot having been fired by Napoleon's orders, as a signal for the previously ordered movements to begin, they give the time of the signal shot with differences ranging over an hour and a half.

CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

Historical narratives properly so called are, of course, the most abundant source of information on historical matters: indeed, they are practically the only source whence most people acquire any knowledge of the past. Even the student, though it is an essential part of his training to learn how to deal with documents not in themselves narrative, must for most purposes rely on actual histories. Hence it becomes important to distinguish between the different classes of historical narrative, and to consider the principles on which their evidential value is to be estimated.

Many avowed histories are of course not evidence at all. They resemble a judge's summing up to the jury, rather than the testimony of the witnesses who have been called before him. They embody the results of an expert's examination of the evidence properly so called, not information which he acquired at first hand. Gibbon or Grote is only an historical authority in the sense that he had accumulated and sifted the testimony available concerning a given historical subject, and put into literary form the

results of his labours. Neither of them could have pretended to any exclusive or original knowledge, to anything more than what other men, with equal industry and expenditure of time, could have acquired on the same subjects. In fact further investigation since their time has thrown discredit on some of the views embodied in their works. The value of such historians depends entirely on two things—on the thoroughness with which they investigate and the trustworthiness with which they sum up the available testimony, and on the soundness of their judgement in generalizing from the facts so ascertained. So far as they can be thoroughly trusted, they save other students from the labour of searching original materials for themselves, a matter of real importance in relation to modern times, when the bulk of documents bearing on any given period or subject may be enormous. The faults, for instance inaccuracy or partiality, which may detract from their value, are such as may be found in any kind of historical narrative. No historical student can ignore the labours of his predecessors, if only for the reason that life is too short. Given that he can trust their accuracy, that he can say to himself—*A* has explored certain records, and I can feel sure that he has reproduced from them all the statements relevant to a given issue, he can limit his own attention to the

inferences which *A* deduces from them. He may or may not have found other testimony bearing on the same subject: he may or may not on consideration be satisfied with the soundness of *A*'s reasoning. At any rate he has in it a compendium of the testimony on which *A* relied, and the judgement of a competent inquirer always deserves to be treated with respect. This, however, is an entirely different thing from regarding his predecessor's opinions, however reasonable, as evidence in any true sense.

Historical narratives which can be called authorities, that is to say, which are the sources whence we directly derive our information, whatever the quality of that information may be, are usually divided into those which are, and those which are not contemporary. A more accurate phraseology would describe the contemporaries as authorities properly so called, and non-contemporaries as the nearest available approach to real authorities. 'Historical evidence, like every kind of evidence,' says Cornewall Lewis,[1] 'is founded on the testimony of credible witnesses. Unless those witnesses have personal and immediate perception of the facts which they report, unless they saw and heard what they undertake to relate as having happened, their evidence is not entitled to credit. As all original

[1] *Credibility of Early Roman History*, i. 16.

witnesses must be contemporary with the events which they attest, it is a necessary condition for the credibility of a witness that he be a contemporary, though a contemporary is not necessarily a credible witness. Unless, therefore, an historical account can be traced, by probable proof, to the testimony of contemporaries, the first condition of historical credibility fails.' The last sentence of this extract tempers down to what is practically possible the severity of the theory. The historian can and in fact must do what the judge, at any rate in England, is precluded from doing, make the best of evidence which is not strictly first hand.

In the first place the most complete contemporary can never have been an actual witness of more than a part of what he relates. Some things he will have seen and heard with his own senses ; much more he will have learned from others who did see and hear, whether in the shape of direct oral testimony, or (in modern times at least) through the medium of accounts published in newspapers and the like, which if not afterwards contradicted or modified are taken to be correct. The historical inquirer of a later date may have access to such contemporary documents, which, so far as they go, put him in the same position as the contemporary who did not see with his own eyes. Roughly speaking, such sources of information are fairly plentiful for most

purposes since the date at which the use of printing became general. If so, they may serve him for checking the contemporary's narrative. Indeed he may very possibly have access to official documents which were not available to the contemporary. On the other hand he is bound to remember that the contemporary, besides the evidence of his own senses, may have obtained oral information while the matters in question were still fresh, and could be avouched by a multitude of eyewitnesses. Such contemporary testimony falls short of affording scientific certainty, as indeed must be the case with all historical matters: but it affords a reasonable basis for belief, and is for practical purposes accepted as certain.

This goes so completely to the root of all historical knowledge, that it is worth while to give an illustrative instance or two. An actor in the events narrated obviously has exceptionally good opportunities for understanding them, and for being acquainted with the truth about details. He is perhaps more likely to be partial than the outside observer: and even if he is not partial in the strict sense of the word, he will from the nature of the case tend to write from a particular point of view. Subject to this contingency, however, he is reasonably classed among the best of contemporary authorities.

Clarendon's *History of the Great Rebellion,* for

instance, is deservedly reckoned one of the most valuable of all the contemporary narratives dealing with that eventful period, apart from its literary merits. Let us see how far Edward Hyde, as he then was, really was an eyewitness. When the Long Parliament met he took an active part from the first, and was personally familiar with all that happened in the House of Commons. When attacks on the church sent him over to the king's side, he presently became one of the king's advisers, at first privately and then avowedly. His ideal being constitutional monarchy, he tended to find himself in opposition to the uncompromising royalists, so that his advice was often overruled: but at any rate he knew at first hand all that passed in the king's counsels. At the same time he saw nothing whatever of the war, and could only learn by hearsay what took place in Parliament after the breach with the king. In 1645, when the scales had already turned against the royalist cause, he was sent into the west of England as counsellor to the boy prince, who might, it was hoped, sustain the falling cause a little longer in that region. Thence he passed into exile till the Restoration, and after being the chief minister of Charles II for seven years, was again driven into exile till his death. His history, planned and partly written during his first period of exile, completed during the second, is obviously the

work of an exceptionally well-qualified eyewitness as to the strictly political part of his subject, though even of that he was not personally conversant with the whole. As to the remainder he merely repeats the information which he had collected, with much pains no doubt, but under unfavourable conditions, for it was necessarily obtained mainly from one side in the contest. Limitations of the same kind apply to the strictly evidential value of writers like Machiavelli and Comines, who nevertheless are rightly regarded as real historical authorities. Thucydides is another historian of the same type, and in general reputation at least equal to any of them: but the specific value of his testimony is not quite so easily calculable. We know that he was in the strictest sense a contemporary of the Peloponnesian war, an actor in Athenian politics, and he may well have been an actual eyewitness of many things that he narrates. We know also that his long period of exile from Athens gave him a wider outlook than he could have had, if resident throughout in his own city. We have further his own assurance that he had taken great pains to ascertain the truth. But he nowhere cites his authority for anything, and he habitually contents himself with stating his conclusions, without giving his reasons for arriving at them. Hence, although he inspires readers with confidence in his general carefulness, and in his

desire to be fair and impartial, we can rarely test specific statements, or do more than take on trust his specific judgements. For instance, he definitely names as the two immediate causes of the war the quarrels over Corcyra and Potidaea between Athens and, primarily, Corinth, ignoring in this connexion the permanent antagonism between Athens and Corinth arising out of the position of Megara, a matter which from the modern standpoint might well be deemed of primary importance. Our difficulty, such as it is, however, results not so much from Thucydides himself, as from the scarcity of other sources of information about the period with which he deals.

The same thing is still more marked in the work of another class of eyewitness historians, those who have written accounts of campaigns in which they themselves took part. Even in the case of a battle it is scarcely possible that one man should have been strictly an eyewitness of the whole, at any rate since the invention of gunpowder. And in the operations of a whole campaign, where armies will be spread over considerable spaces of country, it is literally impossible. A commander-in-chief himself, though he knows exactly what he intended, has to rely on reports furnished to him for information as to what actually took place.

Napier, for instance, is a most valuable original

authority about the Peninsular war. He served in the British army throughout, except during comparatively short periods of absence, due mainly to wounds. He had access to a variety of official documents from which to extract information. Moreover he was in a position to command much information from private sources, from persons who like himself had taken part in the war. He was in the fullest sense an eyewitness for a good deal: but being in Wellington's army he saw nothing personally of the war on the eastern side of Spain, nor of Beresford's subsidiary army which won Albuera. In fact it so happens that the most brilliant and well-known passages in his history describe scenes which he did not himself witness, such as the storming of Badajos. It is no reflection on his narrative to say that the responsibility for its accuracy concerning large parts rests on the testimony of Napier's informants, not of himself. The historian of to-day may find that some item of Napier's description is not in accordance with the topography, or that figures which he gives do not tally with those in official returns that he may or may not ever have seen. In pointing out such things he may in some instances be saying that Napier's observation or memory was inaccurate: but he will more frequently be casting a doubt on the correctness of the information which Napier

collected, or on the soundness of the inferences which Napier deduces from that information. The question whether Napier really was or was not impartial as an historian, is irrelevant to the present issue.

Chambray again, the eyewitness historian of Napoleon's invasion of Russia, is among the best of his class. Every reader of his work is impressed by his diligence, his accuracy, and his fairness. He served from beginning to end in the main body which went to Moscow, and he took great pains to consult the French official documents: moreover he had before his eyes the Russian official narrative. Nevertheless he was an eyewitness in the strict sense of only part of what he describes. One may rely on his having transcribed correctly the documents which he cites, such as dispatches sent at Napoleon's bidding, and summarized accurately the numbers &c. given in the returns preserved at the French War Office. But the fact remains that he personally saw nothing of some of the most important actions in the campaign. That is to say, a large part of the narrative written by one of the most trustworthy of eyewitnesses is the record, not of what he saw, but of what he believed on the evidence which he was able to obtain.

There is no class of historical writings which can be regarded as contemporary, that needs more careful

scrutiny than memoirs. A man who has had good opportunities of learning the truth about public affairs, and has been in the habit of recording things as they happened, is an invaluable witness. He is no more exempt than other writers from liability to partisanship and analogous defects, and has perhaps more temptation to exaggerating his own importance: but on the other hand his partisanship, if it exists, is probably more obvious and outspoken, and therefore less misleading, than similar partiality in a formal history. Memoirs are, more often than not, published long after the events to which they relate, and this for a variety of reasons: but their evidential value is not diminished by the delay, provided that they are written, or at least based on memoranda taken, while the events were fresh. On the other hand mere recollections, written perhaps in old age and retirement, cannot be regarded as of equal value with truly contemporary testimony. Memory is a variable quantity, and sometimes plays strange tricks. Given that the historical student takes due heed to this consideration, and is also on his guard against accepting as genuine writings which, while professing to be memoirs, are wholly or largely fictitious, he will find few classes of documents more valuable, none which are so likely to disclose the inner meaning of public events.

Mediaeval chronicles, again, are a class apart, assuming that the authors are known: if they are unknown, internal evidence alone is available for estimating the evidential value of their work. In times when there was hardly any learning outside the ranks of the clergy, the chroniclers were nearly all ecclesiastics, a few of them men of good birth and position, such as Otto of Freisingen, but the majority mere cloistered monks. Hence it followed that their knowledge of the events which they recorded was entirely at second hand. They would as a rule have seen nothing outside their immediate neighbourhood, would perhaps never have seen the sea or a ship, certainly never a battle: and therefore their accounts of such things would be vague. On the other hand the monasteries were the recognized resting-places for travellers. Their inmates had the best opportunities then available of acquiring second-hand information about what was happening in the world: and those of them who had undertaken to compile chronicles doubtless took pains to learn all that passing travellers could tell them. Their equipment of knowledge was very slight compared to what a would-be historian can possess in modern times: but the impression their writings give is that they did their best. It is easy to suggest probable defects, that they would be narrow-minded, prejudiced, and so forth: but after all what we

know about long periods of history is mainly derived from them, and if they are discredited there is nothing to put in their place.

There is, of course, a point of view from which the historian of a later date has an advantage over the contemporary. Just as the proportions of a great mountain or a great building cannot be appreciated by a spectator who stands close under it, so there may well be better materials for forming a judgement about the meaning of events after some time has elapsed. In Hallam's [1] words :—

> We are in truth, after a lapse of ages, often able to form a better judgement of the course that ought to have been pursued in political emergencies than those who stood nearest to the scene. Not only have we our knowledge of the event to guide and correct our imaginary determinations, but we are free from those fallacious rumours, those pretended secrets, those imperfect and illusive views, those personal prepossessions, which in every age warp the political conduct of the most well-meaning. The characters of individuals, so frequently misrepresented by flattery or party rage, stand out to us revealed by the tenour of their entire lives, or by the comparison of historical anecdotes, and that more authentic information which is reserved for posterity. Looking as it were from an eminence, we can take a more comprehensive range, and class better the objects before us in their due proportions, and in their bearings on one another.

Nevertheless it must not be forgotten that unless additional documents come to light, and provide the later inquirer with fresh evidence which is to

[1] *Constitutional History of England*, ii. 144.

be added to that available for contemporaries, he depends on them for his facts. They may have been misled in various ways, as Hallam points out, as to the import of what they saw and heard; but unless they had recorded what they saw and heard, the later historian would have very scanty materials.

We are a step further off from evidence in the strictly judicial sense when we come to statements made orally long after the event by a real contemporary. If he is relying entirely on his memory, there are necessarily possibilities of his recollections being distorted by any of the defects to which testimony is liable. It is, however, at least a reasonable presumption that the substance[1] may be trusted, even if the details are doubtful. A bona fide record made by another person of such reminiscences would fairly come within Cornewall Lewis's definition of being traced to the testimony of a contemporary.

It is obvious that a record made at second hand, i.e. from the account given to the historical narrator by a person who heard it from the contemporary,

[1] Many persons in Oxford heard the firing from the guns of the fleet, when Queen Victoria's body was being conveyed across from Osborne on the afternoon before her funeral. A child who heard those guns might well remember the fact seventy or eighty years later, but his testimony as to the exact date, if we could imagine it unrecorded, would hardly be deemed conclusive.

is of materially less value : but it need not therefore be ignored as worthless. A story told orally by a real witness of the fact narrated would be likely to be remembered by the hearer in proportion to its impressiveness. The chances of the original witness telling it correctly, of the first hearer repeating it accurately, are obviously impossible to calculate exactly ; they depend altogether on the mental and moral characteristics of the persons concerned, which may vary indefinitely. A second transmission would duplicate the chances of variation from the correct facts, and so on. Thus it becomes useless to lay down any hard and fast rule as to the length of time during which oral transmission of information can be relied on, though experience undoubtedly shows that it is liable to rapid deterioration. A story which made its way into English history may serve as an illustration. Wentworth, afterwards Earl of Strafford, after acting with Eliot and Pym in pressing on Charles I the Petition of Right, took office under the king, and gradually became his chief adviser. It is said that Pym, meeting him soon after he had quitted his old allies, said to him : ' You have left us, but I will never leave you so long as your head is on your shoulders.' This story appeared in print for the first time, with full circumstantial details of time and place, some seventy years after the alleged event. How should

reasonable history treat such a story as this? Criticism finds no inherent inconsistency in it, and no such glaring improbability as would incline one to say that it cannot be believed without cogent evidence. The interval was not so great but what the person on whose authority it was published might have heard it from a contemporary in the strictest sense. To accept or to reject the story is equally a matter of conjecture. Probably the consideration which leads the best judges to reject it is, that neither of the principal actors would have been likely to repeat such a story, whereas it is implied, though not positively asserted, that no one else was present.

Ranking below most mediaeval chronicles in respect of its value as testimony, but yet not altogether to be ignored, is the class of historical narratives which cannot be shown to have any foundation of contemporary authority. If such a narrative deals with a period concerning which we have no information from any other source, the choice is simple. We must either abandon the period with which it deals as entirely unknown, or we must take the account given for what it may be worth. Criticism may very reasonably test the probability of statements made in it, mainly of course in a negative fashion. It may point out that a given

detail corresponds with some item of admitted legend relating to another people, and argue that both have a common origin, for instance in a nature myth. Or it may show that the story lacks coherence in itself, involving perhaps inconsistencies in matters such as time and distance, or includes a supernatural element that may or may not be capable of being rationalized. But when all this has been said, we are little further advanced. We know already that there is no solid evidence to support the story, though it would not have been told unless it had been believed at some period. All that criticism can do is somewhat to weaken our already faint inclination to accept the narrative as perhaps true, seeing that there is nothing else.

Probably, however, there are very few periods of which we know nothing except from a narrative thus devoid of real authority. General outlines, or isolated facts, are recorded incidentally in the historical writings of other nations; or there may be survivals, institutions or rites, possibly inscriptions, belonging to the nation itself, which have descended from the past. Such things may materially assist criticism, enabling it to pronounce this or that conclusion to be reasonably well established: but nothing can alter the fundamental condition that all the inferences are conjectural.

The early history of Rome is the typical instance

of narrative of this kind : and a short review of the questions raised by it may serve to bring out all significant points relating to the evidential value of non-contemporary history. Owing no doubt to the importance of Rome in the world, partly also to the special circumstances of the problem, the Roman was the first specimen of traditional history to be fully and carefully discussed. Niebuhr and his school, not content with pointing out that many of the details were more or less obviously fabulous, thereby raising doubts as to the credibility of the whole, proceeded to suggest sources from which various parts of the story might have been derived, and to reconstruct the history from such indications. Cornewall Lewis and others have shown that there was no trustworthy evidence that the various sources of information, such as Niebuhr assumed, had ever been available as material for written history. It is known that in later times there existed lists of magistrates going back to the beginning of the republic. What is not known is whether the earlier part of these lists were bona fide records made regularly from year to year, or were later compilations. It is known that it was customary, at the funeral of an important person, to deliver an oration setting forth the services rendered to the state by him and his ancestors. In the later centuries of the republic it was the general practice

to commit such orations to writing, though Cicero, who was familiar with them, speaks slightingly of their historical value: but there is no evidence to show how far back such a practice dated. It is known that from very early times inscriptions were placed on tombs, and may have been legible for centuries. From the nature of the case such inscriptions could only furnish an incidental confirmation, or the reverse, of statements contained in a regular narrative: they might be useful negatively as checks, but could hardly afford positive information. As a matter of fact, the earliest of such Roman inscriptions extant, which date from the third century B.C., are as meagre as might be expected: and it would be hard to say that they are of any specific historical value. So again references made to them by actual historians show that some of the great families of Rome had their own annals: but there is nothing to tell us how ancient they were, or whether they were genuine annals instead of compilations from tradition. The analogy of other nations makes reasonable the conjecture that there were ballads about heroic incidents in early times: but none such are extant, or can be positively proved ever to have existed. Even if we assume that there were such things, we do not thereby obtain any solid basis for argument as to the credibility of specific statements. If the

story of the Fabii at the Cremera was derived from carefully kept family annals, there would be some ground for supposing that, while something of the kind actually happened, the self-devotion was extolled beyond what the facts would warrant. As it is, we cannot get beyond the knowledge that the story was current in later times, and the conjecture that it emanated from the family concerned. If we could imagine that Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* were really imitations of known originals, we could be certain that the Great Twin Brethren did not appear to fight for Rome at the battle of Lake Regillus. We should have nothing to guide our judgement as to whether incidents like Horatius's defence of the bridge were or were not truly related.

Of all these conjectural sources of information we can affirm with fair certainty that some existed, though it is no longer possible to discover their degree of proximity to the events. Of others we can only say that there is more or less probability that they once existed. But of all alike one thing holds good: there is no positive clue to guide us as to specific events. Conjectures as to the probable bias of unknown writers from whom the known authors may have derived information afford but a feeble light. And in one or two cases the conjecture is duplicated: it is merely guessed that there may have been ballads and so forth, and that

if there were such things they were likely to have certain qualities.

Every subsidiary source of information relating to early Rome having been thoroughly ransacked, and every aspect of the questions relating to it having been argued out, we ought to be in a position to estimate the evidential value, be it great or small, of what stands for the early history of Rome. There are of course other historians who deal with the subject besides Livy: but none of them are any more of authorities, in the strict sense of the word, than he is. Hence we may fairly take Livy's history as a specimen, and attempt to judge of its value. Livy, who devoted his life to compiling a history of Rome from its foundation down to his own day, wrote more than seven hundred years after the conventional date for the founding of the city. He refers a few times to earlier historians, none of them more than two centuries before himself: nor is there positive reason to think that still earlier historians ever existed. He says further that nearly all written records were destroyed when Rome was burned by the Gauls, an event which happened about half-way between the founding of the city and Livy's own time. His account of the period of the kings, some 250 years, is brief, and is a mixture of obvious legend with business-like narrative. From the date of the expulsion of the

kings his account is much fuller, giving the names of annual magistrates, something of constitutional changes, and a precise list of wars. The prosaic narrative contains a number of picturesque incidents, which critical ingenuity can conjecture to be based on poetical exaggerations, or invented to gratify family pride. There is no doubt that Livy reproduced the history in the form in which it was believed in his day. There can be no doubt also that the then existing magistracies, and some at least of the then current law, dated back to a very distant past. The question remains as to what is the evidential value of the narrative as it stands.

There can of course be no reasonable doubt that there was a regal period at Rome. Apart from the analogy offered by other city states in both Greece and Italy, it is scarcely conceivable that the existing history, giving the names and actions of seven separate kings, should be a mere invention. It is easy to conjecture that Romulus was the ἥρως ἐπώνυμος, the personification of the city itself, that Numa personified the spirit of the Roman religion, that the elder Tarquinius represents a period of Etruscan predominance, and so forth. It is easy also to say that this or that part of the narrative reads like romance, and that some details are plainly fabulous. The fact remains that all such conjectures, however probable, are incapable of verification. We know

in a general way that oral tradition is likely to distort facts very greatly in process of time: but this does not tell us how rapid was the process of distortion in a given case, still less how to discriminate between the traditionally reported facts, so as to discern which are true, which false. There stands the narrative, as told many centuries afterwards, with no positive trace of any written testimony as its basis, with fair grounds for the presumption that there never was any, though it is obviously impossible to prove the negative. Every historical student in such a case may, and doubtless will, form his own estimate as to what may reasonably be believed. He may fairly argue in favour of his own opinion, whatever it be; but he is bound to remember all the time that it is merely opinion, and not ascertained truth.

Similarly it may be considered as certain that the kings were expelled through their own fault. The existence under the republic of a powerless official whose business was to discharge the king's ritual duties, and the persistent dislike at Rome of the very name of king, are sufficient to establish so much. Of the story of the specific cause of their overthrow, and of the tales connected with their efforts to regain their lost throne, one can only say as before—there is the narrative, not at all improbable in substance, however details may have been

embellished: but the evidence on which it rests, so far as we know, is merely oral tradition. It may or may not be true: at any rate it is that or nothing. So too there are enough survivals to make it certain that the law of the Twelve Tables was framed during this period, and highly probable that it was framed by a special board of magistrates. The story of Virginia, on the other hand, is no better authenticated than the story of Lucretia, while no less probable in itself.

To sum up the maxims relating to historical evidence which are illustrated by the early Roman history—if a narrative cannot be shown to have any contemporary written basis, we cannot go further in the direction of accepting it as true than to say that it was once believed, and may be true. Evidence derived from other sources may enable us to form a decided opinion on certain points, while leaving others untouched. Criticism may point out improbabilities, even absurdities, in this or that portion, and so weaken our qualified belief in the whole, or even overthrow it. Criticism also may suggest possible modes in which the story may have grown, and the like, though it must always be borne in mind that such suggestions are conjectural. The one thing which is illegitimate for criticism is to assume that it can divine the truth underlying the existing narrative, which it

declares to be more or less fabulous. It may put forward guesses, and they may seem probable: but nothing can transform them into ascertained facts. Indeed, seeing how many guesses may be made to explain any one bit of fable or romance, it is obvious that a particular guess is far more likely to be wrong than right.

The consideration of an actual case may best illustrate the futility of the hypothesis that the truth underlying an admitted legend may be divined by the ingenuity of historical criticism. There once existed in Germany a legend that the great emperor Frederick Barbarossa was not dead, but lying in a magic sleep in a cavern of the Untersberg near Salzburg, whence he would some day reappear to restore the golden age. Legends of this type have been current about other kings, whose end was coincident with national disaster, and are explicable on the theory of the wish being father to the thought. The circumstances of Barbarossa's death are of course well known: indeed it is believed that the legend originated about his grandson, after whose death abroad Germany had a generation of civil wars and other troubles, and was transferred to the earlier Frederick. But what if Barbarossa had lived in an age concerning which no trustworthy records exist, and there had been merely the obvious legend to go upon? The critic would have regarded

it as quite certain that Barbarossa did not die in his bed, a negative inference which as a matter of fact would have been correct. He would have inferred with almost equal confidence, arguing from other instances, that he perished at a time of great national disaster, probably in a lost battle, an apparently reasonable conjecture which would have been entirely incorrect. And how many hundred guesses would critical ingenuity have required before hitting on his actual fate, that he was fatally chilled by the icy waters of a river in Asia Minor ?

The difference between non-contemporary history, of the type of the earlier part of Livy's work, and mere tradition, rests mainly on the fact that the former is deliberate. Knowing but little of the material at Livy's disposal, we have no means of judging for ourselves whether the narrative which he gives rests on solid evidence. All that we can say is, that our author, who gives reasonably sufficient tokens of his bona fides by mentioning occasionally that there is uncertainty about this or that point, tells the tale as the result of his inquiries. There may have been conflicting accounts about many things—the historian himself mentions a few—and we are equally in the dark as to the ultimate authority for all of them. Criticism may throw light on points of detail, may discover items of

information, unknown to the historian who is under consideration, confirming this or that specific statement, showing that this or that other statement is irreconcilable with known facts. It may always point out improbabilities, and similar reasons for being slow to accept certain things in the historian's narrative. It may also give reasons for believing that other things contained in the historian's narrative must be true: these will probably be general rather than specific statements, such as that the kings at Rome were forcibly expelled. Subject to such modifications resulting from critical inquiry, we are still left dependent for the bulk of our knowledge on the credit given to the non-contemporary writer, who records what was believed in his own age. That his credibility ranks lower than that of an historian dealing with a period copiously treated in contemporary documents which have survived, is inevitable. Minds of a decidedly sceptical turn will declare themselves not satisfied to believe him at all: but even they must allow that the choice lies between accepting a history like Livy's *quantum valeat*, and admitting that nothing can be believed, even conjecturally, on the subject.

The essential thing to be remembered, in respect to an historical narrative like Livy's, is that we do not *know* the sources from which it is derived. It is, as we have seen, possible to conjecture a

variety of written sources; but we do not know either that they did, or that they did not, exist in Livy's time. Failing them, there is only oral tradition as foundation for the narrative which Livy gives. Experience certainly shows that this cannot be trusted to possess any stability, though again it is impossible, unless external information can be utilized, as fortunately is often the case, to guess which items of a traditional narrative are correct, which are perverted entirely. Hence its use to the historical inquirer does not rise above being a basis for conjecture. It is reasonable to presume certain things about it, for instance that a great disaster is likely to be long remembered, or that tradition of an event is more likely to survive in the neighbourhood of the place where it happened than elsewhere: but these are mere presumptions. At the best there is no calculating how long traditions will last, or at what rate they will be modified in passing from mouth to mouth. An extreme case may be quoted to show how far and how fast tradition may deviate from the truth, though it of course affords not even a presumption as to the extent to which another tradition may have been faithful or the reverse. During the Great Rebellion a battle was fought near Devizes, which though on a small scale gave a complete victory to the royalists: the exact scene of the fighting is known as Roundway

Down, from an ancient track which runs along the ridge of the downs. Some decades ago a stranger walking in the neighbourhood said to a man at work in the fields: 'There was a battle fought somewhere about here: can you tell me exactly where it was?' 'Yes, sir,' said the rustic, 'it was up there: Julius Caesar defeated the French and they runned away, and so the place has been called Rundaway Down ever since.' It is not difficult to imagine the fashion in which the recollection of the battle was thus transformed. For a century and a half the French were the only enemies of whom rustics would be likely to have heard the name. Some one must have heard of Julius Caesar as a great conqueror, and assumed that he was an Englishman. There are also plenty of instances of accidental similarity of sound leading to a geographical name being wrongly interpreted. The remarkable thing, as an illustration of the impossibility of relying on tradition, is that in little more than two centuries the local notions of an event recorded in trustworthy history should have assumed so grotesque a form.

A tradition once reduced to writing ceases to be liable to the further disintegration which in a greater or less degree is inseparable from oral transmission. Thenceforth it may be regarded as fixed, subject to the trifling risks of inaccurate copying in the days

before printing. The only additional authority, however, which it derives from being written is that presumably the historian satisfied himself that the version which he gives truly represented the current belief. If he believed it himself, as he perhaps did, the modern inquirer will attach such weight to his opinion as his general reputation justifies: but the tradition itself remains none the less tradition after it has been written down. Spanish authors, describing the conquest of Mexico, tell something of the past history of that uncanny civilization. It is no doubt possible that some of the information that reached their ears came from inscriptions which they could not read, and which, so far as they were truthful, carried back farther into the past the fixing of oral tradition. It is possible also that on certain points they may have been wilfully misinformed, as Herodotus apparently was by the Egyptian priests. Apart from these possibilities, however, we are justified in saying that the Spanish authorities tell us what was believed in Mexico in the sixteenth century as to its past history, though we cannot therefore be satisfied that the current views were correct.

A story cast into ballad form has indeed a fair chance of surviving unchanged. It is easier to exercise the memory than to invent: and the persons who recited such things to unlearned hearers

are not likely to have had the knowledge out of which to frame a revised version. Such modifications are, however, obviously possible: indeed there is a growing belief among scholars that the Homeric poems, in the form in which they were ultimately reduced to writing, had undergone much transformation in this way. Moreover there is not, and cannot be, any evidence that the original composer of a ballad was an authority in any genuine historical sense. The probabilities are indeed all the other way, that he was inspired by partisanship of some sort, such as personal enthusiasm for the hero of the story, or hatred of the enemy who wrought destruction on his country or kindred. There is nothing more than a probability that the ballads were even contemporary with the events which they describe: and if they were not, they are only a less trustworthy form of non-contemporary history. Occasionally, of course, it is possible for criticism to apply tests which will detect with certainty that ballads were not contemporary. For instance, the Robin Hood ballads speak of feats of archery which were perfectly feasible in the fourteenth century, but inconceivable before the longbow had been developed: yet they deal with incidents dated in the reigns of Richard I and John, a full century too soon.

Another point bearing on the evidential value of

tradition is perhaps worth mention: an event which really happened may come to be attached to the wrong place.[1] After the death of Gustavus Adolphus in the battle of Lützen, it was determined to erect a large monolith to his memory on the spot where he fell. It proved impossible, however, to convey so heavy a mass over rough ground to the actual spot; and the stone was left a mile or two off, no doubt with the intention of completing the operation another time with better means of transport. This, however, was never done, as under the conditions prevailing in Saxony during the latter half of the Thirty Years' war is intelligible. Nevertheless local tradition, regardless of genuine history, points out the *Schwedenstein* as marking the spot where Gustavus died.

When we look further back, to times at or before

[1] Local ingenuity may go a step further, and point out an entirely imaginary relic of an historic event. Every reader of Scott will remember how the wounded Marmion is laid down to die beside a well bearing an inscription bidding the traveller pray

> For the kind soul of Sibyl Grey
> Who built this cross and well.

Sir Walter in his notes carefully points out that this well is imaginary, there being in fact no spot on the English side of the field of Flodden from which the dying Marmion could have seen the fluctuations of the battle. Nevertheless, local inventiveness has marked as 'Sibyl's well' a small spring up on Flodden Edge, at least a mile behind where the Scottish line was formed.

the dawn of history, we are apt to find particular localities associated with a quasi-historical personage or event. If the locality is impossible, this doubtless affords a presumption against the truth of the entire tradition. But when we realize how easily tradition might be shifted from one place to another in ages when mankind was not altogether stationary, we shall conclude that the existence of any merely local tradition is hardly worth considering on either side of the argument. For instance, it cannot be said to be positively proved that king Arthur was a real personage. The probability would seem to be that he was a real leader of the Britons in their struggle against the Saxon invaders, and that legends derived from sundry sources have gathered round his name. In any case the Round Table shown in Winchester Castle is necessarily fictitious: but this attaching of Arthur's name to a place where he could never have reigned, cannot fairly be deemed an argument against, any more than for, believing that he ever existed.

CHAPTER IV

DEFECTS OF HISTORICAL WRITERS

When we have collected our authorities, it is necessary, before we can compare them, to obtain some criteria as to their several credibility. There are faults and weaknesses that may be detected in historical authorities of every class, from absolute eyewitnesses down to writers who, like Livy, were anything but contemporary, though they had sources of information no longer accessible to us. The same defects may no doubt occur in historians who merely have consulted and utilized materials open to the rest of the world: but they, as has been said, cannot properly be styled authorities. What mainly concerns the student is to be on his guard against the defects liable to mar, in a greater or less degree, the authorities on which he is working.

It has been said in a previous chapter that the value of all human testimony depends on three things—the opportunities which the witness has had of knowing the truth, his capacity for accurate observation, and his honesty of intention. In classifying the various forms of historical narrative according to their proximity to the events recorded

in them, we have seen that the opportunities enjoyed by the authors vary greatly, and that history would be impossible if we insisted on real eyewitness testimony for everything. Hence the capacity of his witnesses for accurate observation concerns the historical inquirer mainly at second hand. He has more frequently to consider whether his authorities were skilful in collecting and sorting information, than whether they made thoroughly good use of their own eyes. Natural powers of observation depend on two separate factors, keenness of sight and mental retentiveness of impressions. Hence there are great differences, as every court of justice can testify. Some men notice only what specially attracts their attention, while there are others whose memory retains a picture of an entire scene, the accessories as well as the principal point of interest. No doubt the gift of observation can be cultivated indefinitely. A famous conjurer told in his memoirs how his father trained him to note everything he saw, till he could enumerate the contents of a shop window after a single look. Probably no detective was ever really valuable who had not acquired the same sort of faculty. The majority of mankind, however, so we are told by those who have studied the matter, are naturally unobservant of everything to which their attention has not been positively called. The historian will

not be surprised to find his eyewitness authorities vary in the fullness of their observation. He will not think that a given detail is to be disbelieved because, while one records it, another does not: after all they may have formed different estimates of its importance. There is however a defect closely analogous to imperfect observation, of which the historian is bound to take account. There are men who, in investigating a mass of state papers or similar documents, have their minds so fixed on the questions which are to them of supreme interest, that they take little heed of what does not immediately relate to them. They notice everything which directly confirms or contradicts the prima facie impression which it is their main object to test, and omit to notice things which may throw side-lights on it. Such men are sometimes accused of wilful unfairness, though their fault in reality is mental, not moral. It does however shake confidence in their thoroughness: an historian cannot feel sure that they have noted everything of moment in the unpublished documents which they, and possibly they only, have gone through.

The writer of an historical narrative, which we have before us as evidence, of which accordingly we need to estimate the value, may have two forms of motive for diverging from the truth. He may

be swayed by bias for or against particular persons or principles with which he has to deal, or by some kind of self-interest.

1. Impartiality in the barest sense, mere narrative of facts without any indication of the writer's sympathies, is rarely possible, and certainly very seldom desirable. Even in the baldest statement of facts, such as the account in a newspaper of an incident which has no political or moral significance, the reporter is not unlikely to let some phrase escape him which betrays something of his own sentiments. Any historical narrative worthy of the name, even the merest chronicle, will contain some estimates of character, some account of the good or evil resulting from this or that action. In dealing with a subject or period involving great issues, the writer will show, and his narrative would be lifeless without it, which side he is inclined to believe in the right. Could we imagine a chronicler of the Hohenstaufen period who exhibited no sympathy with either Papacy or Empire? Could we imagine a contemporary of Clarendon, covering any of the same ground, and not letting it appear what he thought were the proper relations between the crown and the nation? No writer can be deemed guilty of partiality so long as he states facts truly, and draws his inferences from them fairly. His judgement as to the general merits of the case may

lean decidedly to one side or the other, and lead him to pronounce a given act justifiable or the reverse, but this does not make his narrative otherwise than honest. Indeed it is almost necessary for the secondary and more interesting aspects of history, which follow after the bare facts have been determined, that this should be done. A dispute cannot be thoroughly tried out in a court of law unless the case on each side is set forth by a competent advocate. It sounds paradoxical, but is nevertheless true, that the ends of justice are fully served only when all that can be said for, as well as against, the worst cause, has been effectively presented to the tribunal which has to judge impartially. The analogy holds pretty closely with historical investigation. We seek to form estimates of character for warning or for example, to trace the effects, perhaps through a long series of years, of this or that specific measure or general tendency, to judge whether adherence to this or that principle of government or of conduct is or is not beneficial. And in all this we are helped, and not hindered, if the original authorities on which we depend make clear their own views as to the significance of the immediate facts which they record. It is only when they weight the scales improperly, by ignoring pertinent facts, or imputing motives which are not shown to have influenced the actors, or the like, that they

exhibit an unfair bias. The question is how far this can be tested. If there is separate evidence which satisfies us that a writer has dealt unfairly with a particular matter, two results follow. We disbelieve a specific thing in his narrative, and we entertain a doubt of his general trustworthiness. But in the absence of any such positive testimony, which we are led to believe as against the authority of the narrative under consideration, the line cannot be drawn very distinctly. If a particular writer is our only authority for this or that matter, concerning which his sentiments are obvious, it is inevitable that we should feel a tinge of prima facie suspicion that the facts may not be fairly represented. Our belief in his statement will not be quite so confident as if there were separate and independent testimony in support of it, but we have no grounds for carrying our mistrust farther. In such a case, as continually in dealing with historical evidence, we must be content with something short of unhesitating assurance.

It is doubtless in the process of setting forth the meaning of historical events that the unfairly partisan writer has the most opportunity. Without actually misrepresenting facts, he can do much to distort their significance. He can cite such as support a view that he desires to uphold, those suggesting a different inference being conveniently

ignored. He can assume that the person who performed a particular act foresaw, and intended to bring about, certain consequences—for instance, that the zealots who first preached the Crusades aimed at increasing thereby the authority of the Papacy. He can lay stress on the failings of any personage whom he desires to disparage, implying that they are sufficient to prove him generally worthless. For instance, there is no doubt that the younger Pitt habitually drank more port wine than was good for him. An unscrupulous partisan might use this fact to suggest that a statesman who allowed his brains to be thus besotted rendered himself unfit for his great responsibilities—the truth being that the habit was the result of bad medical advice, and cannot be shown ever to have affected his public conduct. Books have been written, enlarging on the unquestionable fact that the great Napoleon was unscrupulous in the indulgence of his passions, and insinuating, if not directly arguing, that his career as emperor was damaged by women's influence, whereas he never let anything of the kind interfere in the slightest degree with his policy. Against bias of this sort in the authorities on which he has to depend, the historical inquirer must always be on his guard. Fortunately it is likely to betray itself by its own virulence: otherwise it might not be easy to detect. Anyhow there will

always remain the difficulty of estimating exactly the amount of truth that underlies any such exaggeration.

2. A writer of historical narrative in any form can hardly have a personal interest in perverting the truth, unless he has himself taken part in the events that he describes. One may encounter here and there memoirs, usually from the nature of the case military memoirs, in which the author represents himself as the hero of sensational adventures: instances would be invidious, but probably every reader of history and its accessories can recall more than one: Thackeray has given at least two excellent parodies of them. It is the same vulgar instinct which leads other men to brag of fabulous exploits in matters of sport; and though experience shows that such a boaster is not necessarily untrustworthy in other things, yet from the evidential point of view he destroys all confidence in himself. No reader of such memoirs could reasonably accept as proved any statement resting solely on their authority: nor can this distrust be overruled, even if it appears that they agree in other respects with other and more sober authorities.

These are however matters comparatively trifling: what is of real moment to the historian is anything written by men who have played an important part in events, in order to describe or to explain their

policy. Description is of course one thing, argument in explanation or justification is another. The historian has first to satisfy himself as to the facts, then to inquire what construction is to be put on them, by means of the evidence before him. What weight should he ascribe to the utterances of the person who ought to know most about them, and has at the same time the most interest in showing them in a particular light? The question may best be answered by considering a particular case: and no better can be chosen than Napoleon's, who both filled a very great place in history, and had much to say about himself and his doings. His dispatches, whether diplomatic or military, do not now concern us: they are materials for history, but are not in themselves historical narrative.

The various memoirs written by Napoleon's companions at St. Helena, reporting the fallen emperor's conversation, contain many of his statements about events in his past career, as well as much comment on them. It was, in fact, Napoleon's chief occupation, during his exile, to place on record everything that might serve to put himself in a favourable light before the world. The memoirs published by Las Cases and others are at any rate valuable materials for those who would understand and estimate the personality of Napoleon. It is another matter when they are looked at from the

point of view of evidence as to historical facts. He had, it may be fairly said, a good right to act as an advocate for himself, to argue that good intentions were frustrated by unexpected difficulties, or failed to become operative through lack of time and the like. It was excusable if he strove to show that his own plans were soundly formed, and imputed blame for his disasters to subordinates who misunderstood or failed to execute his orders. He had no right whatever to garble facts. It would be irrelevant to consider specific instances in which the facts as stated by other authorities disagree with Napoleon's version of them. As has been said before, the historical inquirer has to make up his own mind from the evidence available, and cannot be surprised if some one else forms a different judgement. Thorough-going Napoleon worshippers accept his word as conclusive, urging truly that he must have known the facts, and declining to believe that he was capable of misrepresenting them. Less prejudiced persons, having good reason to deem Napoleon unscrupulous about falsehood so long as he had a purpose to serve, will probably think that he had an overmastering motive in his desire for fame, and will tend to attach little weight to his statements as to specific facts. On the other hand they will give full consideration to his arguments in explanation or defence of his policy,

even to his attempts to shift all blame on to other shoulders, and will feel, whatever opinion they ultimately adopt, that Napoleon had made out the best case possible for himself, and that it was very convenient that he should have done so.

The most perplexing cases that can occur are when a person who from the nature of the affair must have known the truth, gives different versions of a fact. The obvious temptation is to regard the discrepant statements as simply cancelling each other, and to ignore their testimony altogether. This is no doubt the easiest way out of the difficulty : whether it is a fair one depends on the circumstances of each particular case. One very remarkable instance may serve as an illustration. Few events created a greater sensation in their time than the burning of Moscow, just after Napoleon's invading army had occupied the city. The area devastated by the fire, the extent to which Moscow had been abandoned by the ordinary population, the character of the classes of inhabitants who remained, the weather conditions that directed and controlled the ravages of the fire after it had once begun—all these things are fully known. Yet it is not too much to say that the original cause of that great destruction is unknown. It is easy to rule out suggestions made on each side. The invaders imagined it to be an act of patriotic vandalism on

the part of the Russians. The grief and rage of the Russian people at the destruction of their holy city ascribed it to the wilful brutality of their enemies. There are obvious arguments which negative both of these suppositions. It was either the deliberate act of Count Rostopchin, the governor of Moscow, done without the knowledge and contrary to the feelings of the government and the nation, or else it was accidental. Very little inquiry into the circumstances will show the possibility of the latter alternative: but the interest of the case, as an illustration of the working of historical evidence, lies on the other side. Count Rostopchin at the time made no secret of having caused the fire, and indeed boasted of it as a patriotic act. Unless he had done so, there would have been no evidence worthy of serious consideration connecting him with it. A good many years afterwards, when an exile from Russia, he formally denied his complicity. Which is to be believed, his early affirmation or his subsequent denial? The reader must judge for himself which story he prefers to accept. At any rate here is a man who was solely responsible (always supposing that the conflagration was really contrived and not accidental) for a notorious act of much historical importance, giving two contradictory statements about it. Such cases are very rare, if this one is not unique: but they are enough

to warn the historical student against too implicit confidence in statements made by men concerned in public affairs, on the ground that they must have known the truth.

There are other mental habits besides inaccuracy and wilful partiality which may detract from the evidential value of some historical writers, the most important being credulity. The most ordinary experience shows that many men, by natural predisposition or by acquired habit, are inclined to be too credulous: others perhaps tend to be too sceptical. A trained historical writer ought to be, and doubtless will be in intention, on his guard against yielding to either tendency: but even he does not always keep the balance steady. And there are plenty of writings that must be regarded as historical authorities of more or less value, which contain obvious indications that their authors were not very careful in weighing the information given to them. The historical student needs to bear this contingency in mind, though he cannot formulate any rules for his guidance. The extent to which a tendency to credulity weakens the value of an historical authority can only be estimated in the vaguest way. Statements in themselves perfectly reasonable and probable may in fact have been made by him in reliance on untrustworthy testimony. When this has occurred, it is only if separate

evidence of some sort is available, that grounds are discoverable for mistrusting his authority on these specific points. On the other hand things which sound very improbable may very well have happened. All that the historical inquirer can fairly do, if he comes to the conclusion that a given writer tends to be too credulous, is to attach less general weight to his authority.

One consideration must however be borne in mind. An historical writer of a past time cannot reasonably be stamped as credulous, merely because he believed things which we, with greatly extended means of information, know to be untrue. The stories of miracles wrought by mediaeval saints are many of them, to our minds, palpably absurd and incredible. But it does not follow, because a monkish chronicler records things of this kind in which his age believed without hesitation, that we are therefore to deem him too credulous to be accepted as an authority for matters in which no miracle was involved. We know now that the sixteenth-century stories about the golden city of Manoa, situated somewhere up the Orinoco, were entirely baseless. But men who knew of the recent Spanish experiences in Mexico and Peru cannot be disparaged for undue credulity, because they believed that another such state would be found in the still unexplored recesses of America. Herodotus again is an historian

whose value as an authority has been much discussed from many points of view. It would be manifestly unreasonable to disparage his testimony on the Persian wars because, sharing the physical ignorance of his age, he denies the possibility of snow falling in the regions south of Egypt, and disbelieves the Phoenician circumnavigation of Africa because the mariners said that during one part of the voyage they had the sun to the north of them. It would be equally irrelevant to argue that his acceptance of current legends as historical proves him too credulous to be trustworthy.

It is obviously possible to be too sceptical as well as too credulous: but this is a fault which the historical inquirer needs to guard against in dealing with his authorities, rather than one which the authorities fall into. For instance, some writers on early Roman history, which assuredly rests on no written testimony that is known to be contemporary, have thought fit to assume that the stories about the origin of sundry institutions (magistracies, religious rites, legal customs, and so forth) were invented long afterwards in order to explain things of which the true origin was forgotten. It is no doubt the case that there is no positive evidence worthy of the name in support of these stories, and that therefore they may be inventions: but this is no adequate ground for asserting that they must

be inventions. When an historical question is shrouded in uncertainty through the lack of adequate testimony, we must leave it uncertain. We have no more right to assume sceptically that the information which we possess is entirely false, than to take the credulous view, and regard conclusions as proved when proper evidence is wanting.

It appears then that wherever collateral testimony is available, the inquirer ought to be able to form a judgement as to the general merits of any given historical authority. He seems perhaps to have a bias in this or that direction, to show a tendency towards undue credulity, or towards arriving at conclusions too hastily; he was presumably ignorant of matters now known, and his views were correspondingly defective. If our collateral testimony is ample, we can judge confidently as to the character of any such defects in the authority whom we are studying, and come to a conclusion as to the extent to which we shall distrust his evidence. Any such estimate will necessarily be general and not specific. All that an unfavourable estimate implies is that we receive with some hesitation all statements made by our authority, and especially those on matters concerning which his particular bias, or other defect, would seem likely to have influenced his opinion. Moreover, on any points where his testimony is at

variance with other available evidence, we shall be inclined to give it little weight. Specific statements, on matters with which his particular defect, whatever it be, has no direct concern, are practically unaffected. We shall accept none of them as unhesitatingly as if they emanated from an authority of whose competency we have no doubt whatever: but our view of his general merits gives no criterion for choosing between one specific statement and another. The most bigoted partisan may be giving a thoroughly true account of a transaction which is of special importance to the cause that he favours; the most credulous of writers may be telling a perfectly true story, even if it sounds improbable. What applies to all historical investigation applies here with somewhat increased force and frequency. We form our conclusions with more or less hesitation, and possibly reserve judgement altogether. We must judge under reserve, and cannot attain to unhesitating belief.

When there is no external testimony available, there is nothing left but internal criticism by which to test the value of an historical writer: and it is scarcely possible to lay down any general rules as to its scope and force. It is easy to see that if a writer makes a statement inconsistent with permanent facts he must be wrong; but that weighs very little by itself. The most honest and

generally well-informed of writers may make a mistake. So too if he is inconsistent with himself, one statement or the other must be untrue; and it is only on considering each such case by itself that one can form an opinion as to which is right. It is only when such inconsistencies recur that one is justified in branding the author as too careless to be trusted. Linguistic criticism, again, may go far towards showing that a book supposed to belong to a given date must in fact have been written much later. But the only way in which this affects belief in the substance is when the author is supposed to have been contemporary, and, therefore, to have had first-hand knowledge of the events which he relates. Internal criticism may indeed suggest that the author was a partisan, and our general knowledge that partisanship is liable to lead authors into misrepresenting facts may reasonably render us suspicious: but no merely internal indications could justify our totally disbelieving the author's specific statements on a matter concerning which, *ex hypothesi*, we have no evidence but his. Too much reliance on internal criticism is an obvious snare: it tends towards substituting the mere opinion of the critic for the testimony which he has impugned.

The results of inquiry as to the defects which historical authorities are more or less likely to

exhibit are therefore mainly negative. Where we see reason to believe in their existence we feel diminished general confidence in the writer, and in extreme cases we withhold credence altogether. Usually this only means that the weight of the testimony is to our judgement lowered when it has to be compared with any conflicting testimony. In the less frequent cases where it stands alone we can merely acquiesce in uncertainty: what it tells is of doubtful validity, but there is nothing to put in its place. And probably every historical inquirer would agree to the proposition that, though many specific events are indubitable, the authorities are few and far between who can be trusted absolutely and unhesitatingly, both as to the facts recorded by them, and as to the inferences which they deduce from these facts. It does not seem altogether satisfactory that so much should be left in the dubious state implied by having to accept or reject statements of imperfect credibility. History is undoubtedly the worse off for having no power of verifying by experiment, as most natural sciences can; but there is nothing gained, and something may be lost, by assuming a greater certainty than is reasonably established.

It being right and even necessary to inquire, so far as the conditions of each case allow, into the credibility of each historical witness whom we are

examining, it is hardly more than a verbal exaggeration of the inquirer's right attitude, to say that he should refuse the testimony of any such authority until his trustworthiness has been fully tested and established. Some writers on historical method, however, e.g. MM. Langlois and Seignobos in their *Études Historiques*, go very much further. They declare that every separate statement made by an historical writer must be isolated, and disbelieved unless confirmation of it has been obtained *ab extra*. In this way, and in this way only, they say that scientific certainty in historical matters is attainable. It is obvious that no such method could seriously be carried out. If another historical authority confirms, even in the most complete manner, a given statement, the trustworthiness of the confirming testimony requires itself to be tested in the same fashion, and so on *ad infinitum*. Indeed MM. Langlois and Seignobos give away their own case, first by asserting that the trained historian can learn to judge instinctively of the correctness of statements coming under his notice, which amounts to little more than substituting his own *ipse dixit* for that of his authority, and still more by saying that the business of ascertaining the facts on which history is to be based ought to be a separate affair. The historian is to take his materials from drudges who are assumed to have the requisite

gifts for sifting materials, but not those for utilizing them in a coherent history. So far as this is done, the historian obviously cannot even pretend to scientific certainty: all that he has is belief in what is told him by his drudges. He will no doubt have confidence, even well-grounded confidence, in their general accuracy and thoroughness: but he can have no guarantee that they have not made a mistake or an omission here and there. In truth scientific certainty is a phrase inapplicable to historical matters, concerning which we can only have belief, true though it be that belief may be, and often is, so confident that doubt vanishes altogether.

This is of course an entirely different thing from criticism, which deserves to be fully considered when directed against an historical authority, whether we do or do not ultimately accept its judgement. It is one thing to say that certain statements in a narrative have a fabulous look, or are intrinsically improbable, and to infer thence that the evidential value of the whole is slight. It is quite another thing to pick a narrative to pieces, and to assert that every separate element in it is to be treated as unworthy of belief, unless other evidence is forthcoming to corroborate it. Historical writers may be ill-informed, or credulous, or prejudiced, but the prima facie presumption is that they would

not have written unless they had believed, possibly on insufficient grounds, that they were recording what was true.

Let us take a concrete example, all the more instructive because it has been discussed by many experts and from many points of view. Critics are within their rights in pointing out that the historical books of the Old Testament are mostly anonymous, and that there are grounds, linguistic and other, for thinking that they were compilations. They do well to compare the Old Testament narrative with the corresponding inscriptions, Egyptian, Assyrian and so forth, and to point out matters in which these independent authorities do or do not confirm each other. They may argue that the miraculous incidents recorded in the Old Testament are in themselves incredible, and therefore cast suspicion on the credibility of the whole. All such considerations are to the purpose, whether we are convinced by them or not, whether we think that the silence of the Assyrian inscriptions as to an event recorded in the second Book of Kings does or does not weigh down the scale, whether we do or do not admit the inherent incredibility of miracles. Critics have no right to go beyond this, and to say (for instance) that whereas in the Books of Samuel it is related that king Saul perished in battle with the Philistines, and that David succeeded him after an

interval during which part of the nation upheld the son of Saul, each of these statements is to be disbelieved unless adequate extrinsic evidence can be adduced to sustain them. On such a method it would be practically necessary to disbelieve everything which is recorded as history down to the date when printing became general, and a great part of what passes as history since that time.

CHAPTER V

DOCUMENTS NOT NARRATIVE

Of documents from which historical information may be derived, as distinguished from direct historical narratives, there are many varieties. There are countless inscriptions dating from the very earliest times, some of them made for the purpose of recording public events, others only giving information incidentally. Similarly there are laws of all ages, from which much may be gathered as to the peoples subject to them, whether or not their date and the purpose of the legislator is embodied in them, or otherwise known. There are analogous public documents, such as royal charters and grants. There are state papers in the strict sense, records of administrative proceedings, reports made to a government on matters domestic or foreign : Domesday Book may serve as a specimen. There are diplomatic dispatches, in which are embodied the claims or views of one state in controversy or in friendly negotiation with another. There are orders issued to generals in the field, and reports from them. There are private letters and memoirs which incidentally mention public affairs, and throw light

on the social history of their age and country. Some of these sources of information are specially valuable for the past, some are only available for recent times: probably no two of them can be treated by the historian in exactly the same fashion.

2. The inscriptions of the modern world are memorials, not records. A monument like the Nelson column is erected in honour of some great man or great event, whose memory its very existence serves in some measure to keep green, even if there is no inscription at all. If there is one, it will certainly be very short, for its purpose is merely to inform the passers-by whom or what the monument is intended to commemorate. It is of course possible that such an inscription may perpetuate some incorrect belief, or contain some exaggeration. On the monument of the great fire of London were inscribed words imputing the origin of the fire to the Roman Catholics, an accusation which history does not support, though it was believed at the time. In the amazing list of French victories in the wars of the Revolution and Empire, inscribed on the great Arc de Triomphe at Paris, are names of battles which impartial history describes as very far from victories. In general however modern inscriptions are brief and business-like, and have no historical value (there being plenty of other records

available), except in the few cases where they record some past phase of belief.

It is scarcely too much to say that inscriptions are the most copious of all sources of information about the ancient world. In the days when books hardly existed, Egyptian, Assyrian and other monarchs were in the habit of recording the events of their reigns on tablets, many of which have survived to our own times, and were deciphered with much labour in the last century. At first experts were by no means agreed as to the interpretation of them: but steady progress has been made since the first discoveries, and it may be said that all Egyptian and Assyrian inscriptions can be read, though of course some are mutilated and consequently of doubtful meaning, and that those in languages of which less copious remains survive are likely to be equally well understood in process of time. It is a further question how far it is possible to check the statements contained in these inscriptions. They can of course be compared with one another, and to a certain extent with the narrative of the Old Testament: but even after this has been done there are many statements which stand alone, with no written material by which they can be tested. Criticism can point out general probabilities. Their very purpose being to commemorate things which the authors wished to keep in remembrance,

they will not record disasters. For instance, no Egyptian inscriptions yet discovered expressly confirm the narrative of the Exodus: but it is not to be expected that they would, any more than that English inscriptions should commemorate Bannockburn, or French ones Crecy. That is to say, they furnish no solid argument against, any more than for, the historical accuracy of the Pentateuch. Similarly it may be presumed that inscriptions will tend to exaggerate successes. These however are only generalities: the critic has rarely ground for saying that a specific statement is or is not accurate. In a few points, where there could be no motive for misrepresentation, such as the name and parentage of the king who caused the inscription to be made, they will naturally be accepted without hesitation. Beyond this the historical inquirer can only say—this is all the information that we have, if it is not to be believed we have nothing. The great difficulty, however much the statements in the inscriptions may be accepted, is to assign a chronology to the events recorded. This however arises from the nature of the case, and archaeology may often furnish approximate data.

It has sometimes been said that, since all things gradually perish with time, inscriptions also will wear out, and become more or less undecipherable. This however does not affect their historical value.

If all that we possess of a given inscription is mutilated or blurred, and was so when it was first brought to light, the modern inquirer may indeed be doubtful as to its import, but only because he is reduced to conjecture as to the words no longer legible. What he can read has its genuineness unimpaired. And when once an inscription has been carefully copied and printed, subsequent deterioration by the operation of time counts for nothing.

The inscriptions of later ages, say of the Roman Empire, serve a different purpose. They are mostly private, their intention being to express the religious feelings of the person who set them up, or his affection for some deceased relative. Incidentally they serve to check, or to amplify, the statements of the contemporary writers, to fill in details as to the administration in the provinces, to give glimpses of private life. And obviously information given thus incidentally is trustworthy: the writer of the inscription on a votive altar or a tombstone had no motive for misstating anything that chances to have an historical significance, though it is obviously possible that he may have been ignorant. So far as any information thus derived goes to modify or to fill out the statements contained (say) in Tacitus, it may be relied on, but this does not go far. For most purposes we can only receive an historian for

what he is worth, aware probably of his bias or of the looseness of his information, but rarely able to correct or supplement him on specific points.

Mediaeval inscriptions, while coming generally under the same category as those of the Roman Empire, are less numerous, and of much less historical importance. Probably the most interesting things among them are the inscriptions deliberately framed by the Roman Church to support the Pope's claim to universal dominion. The Church, having no armed strength wherewith to enforce its claims, had no other weapon at its command than incessant assertion of a theory which no doubt men like Pope Innocent III honestly believed to be sound. Moreover in an unlearned and uncritical age anything committed to writing had an authority which we can hardly understand. The two most noted instances were the inscription commemorating the coronation of Rudolf of Hapsburg as emperor,

Petra dedit Petro, Petrus diadema Rodolpho:

and the still more untruthful one which incidentally sought to bribe the republican sympathies of the city of Rome, always restive under papal government :

Rex venit ante fores, iurans prius urbis honores,
Post homo fit Papae, sumit quo dante coronam.

§ Laws are not, like some inscriptions, made public in order to record historical facts : like the majority

of inscriptions they only give incidental information. Their purpose is entirely different, to enjoin or forbid the doing of certain acts, according to the will of the supreme power in a community. Nevertheless they are on the whole the most valuable of all the classes of documents which, without being themselves historical in form, furnish materials for history. But this only holds good so long as the limitations applying to them are kept steadily in view, and these are not in all cases the same.

In a society which is working its way towards civilization laws will be among the first things committed to writing: hence they will very probably have an authenticity which the current history of their time does not possess. The very object of the ruler who promulgates them is that his subjects may know and obey his will. They may be honestly intended for the good of those subjects: or it may be that the ruler thinks it advantageous or convenient to himself to set them forth. At any rate when they are once committed to writing—and this will generally be in the shape of inscribed tablets—there is every chance of their language being preserved unaltered. Moreover it would seem to be the tendency of primitive societies to treat their laws, once promulgated, as sacred, and therefore to attach superstitious importance to the exact form of words.

Some at least of the Greek states had codes of law at dates long antecedent to written history, bearing the names of individuals. It does not at all follow, because we know their content, that we can trust the stories told about the personality of the lawgivers, and the way in which they came to undertake the task of legislation. Nor can it be held with any confidence that the laws, as they descended to historical times, were wholly the work of the reputed lawgivers: they may have been supplemented as time went on. They may even have been traditional customs, ascribed to some legendary hero, and never committed to writing till long after they had become the accepted rule of life of the community. What can be affirmed with some certainty is that such a code must have descended from more or less remote antiquity, and that it fairly represents the social ideas dominant among the people ruled by it. Criticism will naturally draw inferences from the contents, and these, in the absence of external testimony by which to check them, can only be stated tentatively. However reasonable they may seem, they must be only conjectural: but even so they may suggest or support useful historical generalizations.

Take for instance the laws of Lycurgus. The account given of the man himself, and of the circumstances under which he legislated for Sparta,

must be treated like any other narrative about which no contemporary testimony is known to exist. But as to the laws themselves there is no doubt: whatever the date and conditions of their enactment may have been, they continued to be for centuries the rule of life to what from some points of view was the most efficient and successful of Greek states. Their historical importance, their influence in moulding the character of the Spartan people, and through them upon all Greece, the inferences that may be drawn as to the probable effect of similar laws upon other states—all these things are entirely independent of the question of Lycurgus's personality.

It is only in late times that the text of laws ceases to be of historical value. In the long period intermediate between (say) the Twelve Tables and Magna Charta, there may or may not be direct narrative available, rendering it unnecessary to conjecture the conditions which led to the passing of a given law. In modern times the historian need not scrutinize the text of a law in order to deduce inferences from it. The date, the specific provisions, and the authority by which it was issued, are perfectly well known even under a despotic government. In a constitutional country there will pretty certainly have been more or less of public debate over its provisions, besides a formal statement of the

intentions of the government that proposed it, and very probably a discussion of it in the press from various points of view. Opinions may differ as to the policy of a measure, hostile critics may suggest that the real motives of its authors were not those avowed: but no question of evidence can arise in the general publicity of all such things.

One caution is however necessary. If the preamble of a statute contains, as it easily may, statements of fact, their being so stated is in no way proof of their historical truth. The preamble no doubt expresses the opinion which the enacting authority holds, or desires that others should hold: and if there be anything asserted in it which impartial judgement would hesitate to accept as true for the past, it is probable that the operative part of the statute will settle the question for the future. But however clear the action of the legislature may be in making (say) a certain thing illegal for the future, its incidental declaration that this was also illegal in the past is not in itself evidence.

An instance or two taken from the age of the English revolution will make the point clear: others might easily be found. The Bill of Rights beyond all question makes the maintenance of a standing army, without the consent of Parliament, illegal. But its preamble, which embodies the Declaration of Right previously passed by the Convention Parlia-

ment that gave the crown to William and Mary, declares that it was already illegal: and this statement history cannot accept. The experience of the past half-century had made it clear that constitutional liberties were not safe without such an enactment. But it does not therefore follow that Charles II did an illegal act at the Restoration, when he laid the foundations of our standing army by retaining Monk's regiment in his service as the Coldstream Guards. So too the Act of the Long Parliament abolishing ship-money recited in the preamble all the proceedings against Hampden, including the decisions given by the judges in favour of the king's claim, and went on to declare all those proceedings contrary to law. There was good ground for thinking that the judges had violated their duty, and ample reason for making it clear for the future that ship-money was not to be levied by prerogative. Nevertheless the court whose proper function it was to interpret the law had held the opposite view. Again, the Act of Attainder against Strafford recited in the preamble the unlawful actions of which he was accused, and declared that the Parliament was satisfied of his guilt; after which it went on to enact that he should suffer death as a traitor. Of the technical correctness of this there is no doubt: Strafford had been accused of these acts, and Parliament held it proved that

he had committed them: many of them were in fact unquestioned. It was also clearly within the power of Parliament to condemn him to death, however much opinions may differ as to the necessity or moral rightfulness of so doing. But if the preamble had also stated that the specific actions of Strafford were treasonable, it would have been making an assertion of very dubious historical correctness.

We are familiar in modern times with state papers embodying information collected for some government purpose. The report of a royal commission on a subject like the Poor-law contains not only the conclusions to which the commissioners have come, but also full notes of the evidence on which their judgement is based. Such a document is published, and is freely discussed. Hostile critics may perhaps point out that evidence has not been taken which would in their opinion have modified the result, or may argue against the wisdom of the policy suggested in the report. No one however can doubt that the evidence published was really given. Nor is there any doubt that information gathered in earlier times for the benefit of the government only, such a thing as Domesday Book for instance, was perfectly genuine, in the sense that the officers employed to obtain it stated what in their belief was true, even though they may possibly

not have got at all the truth. Over a few such documents, notoriously over the reports on the condition of the monasteries in the reign of Henry VIII, a heavy cloud of partisanship hangs. It is certain that those in authority desired to find reasons for dissolving the monasteries, and therefore that the sloth and vice existing among them were made the most of. It is certain on the other hand that the accusations were not all false. What proportion of them were well-founded, what judgement should be passed on this or that specific monastery, are questions on which an historical student who has occasion to inquire into the matter must form his conclusions as best he can.

Of the many charters and similar documents executed by mediaeval sovereigns it is only necessary to say one thing. In an illiterate age written documents were treated with much respect, and could not be scrutinized skilfully: and in the comparatively unsettled state of society private rights were not always easy to uphold. Hence there was a recurring temptation to back up rights, perhaps valid in themselves but merely resting on long possession, by adducing some written warrant, or to base on similar documents claims entirely fraudulent. Expert investigation in modern times has been able to give a confident verdict as to the genuineness or otherwise of many of them: and probably none

should be accepted unless expert opinion has definitely pronounced in their favour.

In dealing with diplomatic correspondence, the historical student is spared trouble in one respect: he may feel perfectly sure that dispatches existing among the state papers of the country to which they profess to be addressed, were really so written and delivered. Nor is it otherwise than highly improbable that a dispatch found in the archives of the state from which it professes to emanate is not genuine, though it must be admitted to be just possible that it was drafted, but never sent.[1] On the other hand, such documents cannot be regarded as stating historical truth. They are avowedly the work of an advocate making the best case that he can for his own side, perhaps even deliberately attempting to trick the other party to the correspondence. The more despotic and the more unscrupulous a ruler is, the further his diplomacy is likely to go in the way of misstatements and untenable assumptions. Napoleon's, for instance, is full of such assertions as that the laws of nature

[1] In Napoleon's voluminous *Correspondence*, as edited and published during his nephew's reign, the editors have appended to some diplomatic dispatches a note to the effect that these were never actually sent. It does not appear on what they based this opinion, or whether they took steps to verify it by reference to the foreign archives concerned.

enjoin whatever it may suit him to insist on. History can obtain from such documents a good deal of light on character, but little or none on actual facts. History has of course also to take account of diplomatic proceedings that are not embodied in formal documents, such as verbal communications never committed to writing, sometimes made in this fashion in order that they may be disavowed if expedient; and it is quite possible that nothing beyond inference from scanty indications is available, giving rise to nicely balanced questions of evidence. This, however, lies apart from the testimony of diplomatic papers.

It should be added that the modern practice of publishing blue-books (to use the English phrase) about international controversies has done much to check any extravagances in diplomatic assertions. Such publication is very largely an appeal to the opinion of the civilized world, and the more moderately a case is stated, the more effective such an appeal is likely to be. No modern blue-book will ever contain anything like Napoleon's declaration that the English Orders in Council on maritime law rendered the independence of Holland impossible, still less anything like Pope Innocent III's assertion that certain words in the book of Jeremiah proved his claim to dispose of the imperial crown to be of divine authority.

Another species of correspondence which deals with international affairs, the confidential reports sent by agents abroad to the governments employing them, are from every point of view valuable as sources of historical information. The agents, whether in some way accredited representatives or private persons, naturally have every motive for reporting home the exact truth, so far as they can ascertain it, else they would not be discharging the duty on which they are employed. And the governments which rely on their information have every motive for selecting capable agents. No careful reader of the history of Elizabethan and early Stuart times can have failed to notice the amount of knowledge of English affairs exhibited by successive Spanish ambassadors in their dispatches to Madrid. Spain was at that period in a position to exercise great influence, even in the country which was then her natural enemy: and doubtless money was not spared to purchase information. Still more valuable to the historian are the reports regularly sent to the republic of Venice in the same and earlier times, by her agents in various countries. Venice then had an international importance considerably above her fighting strength. Hence it was of vital moment to her astute government to know as much as possible of the doings and sentiments of the European powers. Even more impor-

tant, because extending over many centuries, and dealing with all Christian countries, is the mass of documents in the Vatican, which have never yet been fully investigated.

Of course too much must not be expected from any such papers. A foreign agent is not likely to mention things that do not concern his own government, though it would be no exaggeration to say that everything happening in Europe was more or less directly of interest to the Roman Church, from the time when the great pretensions of the Papacy began under Gregory VII downwards. On the other hand important personages, who had in fact received money from a foreign power, would be sure to deny it if any suspicion arose. The impartial historian will probably believe the confidential report of the bribing agent rather than the denial of the bribed. Taking everything into account, one may accept as true what is positively stated in such papers as the Venetian *relazioni*, but it would be very unsafe to base any argument on their silence.

Military documents, which are of sufficient historical importance to deserve separate discussion, are by no means all of the same character, and their significance must be determined by very various criteria. The instructions given by a government to the commander of its armed forces

engaged in a campaign, or on the point of undertaking one, are state papers in the strictest sense. The only critical question that can arise concerning them is whether their contents imply that the government issuing them was thoroughly well informed: there can be no doubt that they embody its intentions. Similarly there need be no doubt as to the bona fides of the dispatches sent by a general to the government that he is serving, so long as they are confidential. He has every motive for reporting the exact truth, none for withholding it, unless it be a short-sighted desire to conceal for the moment his own lack of success—short-sighted, because the inevitable result would be to destroy confidence in him as soon as the truth came to be known. His information may easily be imperfect: it is but seldom that a general in the field can be certain of every matter on which he wishes to report: he cannot for instance know the enemy's plans, though he may more or less divine them, and his intelligence as to their movements may well be incomplete.

Dispatches intended for immediate publication stand on another footing.[1] There may be many

[1] The home government, and not the general in the field, will practically always decide whether anything shall be withheld, on grounds of present policy. When the time comes for history, the full original dispatch will, at any

reasons, good and bad, for not disclosing the whole truth. Naturally nothing will be announced which it may benefit the enemy to know—a consideration of infinitely more importance at present than in the days before the electric telegraph. It used sometimes to be thought expedient to conceal a disaster from the nation whose army has been beaten, but such a measure is of very dubious wisdom. The victor is sure to publish abroad his success, and with all the facilities now existing for the rapid diffusion of intelligence, attempts to conceal a *fait accompli* are very likely to produce worse effect than a frank disclosure of it. In 1870 the French authorities, ill prepared in all respects for a decisive war, did their best to minimize, even to deny, the first Prussian successes: and this futile policy was more or less responsible for the belief which became rooted in a large part of the French nation, that every disaster was due to some one's treason. Exceptional circumstances may no doubt arise. Perhaps the most outrageously false dispatch ever published was that which Napoleon sent home after the passage of the Berezina, announcing a great victory with immense captures of cannon and prisoners: but to have done otherwise would have been to risk a hostile rising in Germany and his

rate for modern times, be pretty certainly found in its place in the national archives.

own immediate ruin. Such dispatches however, if justifiable as a *ruse de guerre*, have no historical value in themselves. They only call attention to one of the many reasons why the historical inquirer cannot rely on the first published accounts of events.

The orders issued to his subordinates by the general in chief in a campaign on a large scale are invaluable material for the historian. From them can be inferred with something like certainty both what he was intending and what he knew at the moment concerning the enemy: and this is the only fair basis for a judgement of his conduct. It is comparatively easy to be wise after the event, in war even more than in peace, and to see that a given step entailed momentous consequences. But a general, or a statesman, is only blameworthy by history if he knew the facts that we know now, or could reasonably be expected to foresee them. It is of course true that with all modern appliances the commander-in-chief may easily know much more than was possible a century ago, and has therefore greater facilities for forming correct plans. Hence there is probably less unfairness in judging by results now than formerly. But the electric telegraph is after all a thing of yesterday: the historical student need be careful lest familiarity with what is possible to-day should lead him to make the tacit assumption that a general in earlier

times could have known as much about his enemies as Moltke knew in 1870. Indeed there are few more effective ways of realizing the importance of evidence in the making of history, and therefore for the understanding of it, than to follow out some complicated campaign concerning which the documents are extant, and note what information the commander possessed at each step, what he did in consequence, and how far the facts corresponded to his beliefs.

¶ Private letters and diaries are often of great historical usefulness, the nature of the information derivable from them varying according to the position of the writers. If these are entirely unconnected with public affairs, it may be safely assumed that their incidental mention of such matters will be bona fide. Their knowledge may be imperfect, even totally wrong, but what they say represents the current belief around them at the moment, as to this or that event. Perhaps the most valuable form of information which the historian derives from such papers is as to the trend of public opinion.

When the writer is himself concerned in the events which he mentions, though in some humble capacity, say as a subaltern officer on a campaign, his statements need be scrutinized with more care, as personal vanity may have tempted him to distort facts for his own glorification. But if there seems

no reason to doubt his good faith, his account of things within his own personal knowledge need not be disbelieved merely because he makes gross mistakes about the larger aspect of affairs. For instance, a diarist who served in Napoleon's Moscow campaign mentions incidentally a battle, in which, according to him, 11,000 French totally defeated a large Russian army, inflicting on it immense losses. The numbers engaged and the losses were in fact about equal, and the immediate result only slightly to the advantage of the French. The false account which he gives may well have been that current in the army (he was not himself in the corps engaged), and may even have been circulated on purpose to prevent discouragement, the ultimate effects of the battle (Malojaroslavetz) having been very disastrous. One need not disbelieve a sergeant's account of his own personal adventures, merely because we find mixed up with them reports of this kind, however false. On the other hand, another man who served in the same campaign tells how he was one of a body of cavalry sent out from Moscow, which marched several hundred miles, obtained remounts for the whole detachment, and returned bringing to Moscow a great convoy of provisions that they had collected, all in about a fortnight. This being patently impossible, we cannot hesitate to declare the writer a clumsy liar,

who failed to give any plausibility to a story invented to glorify himself.

When we are dealing with the private papers of rulers and statesmen, the case is again altered. As a rule it is only by treachery or misadventure that anything is known about them till long afterwards, though if they do fall into hostile hands they may produce a great effect. The publication of the papers of Charles I, captured at Naseby, under the title of 'The King's Cabinet opened', was of much service to the parliamentary cause. In process of time, in the modern world, a statesman's papers are published, or access to the MSS. is given to historical inquirers: and then they serve to explain, more or less fully, how or why things came to pass, the events themselves being previously known. Critical acuteness must draw its own conclusions as to whether the writer told his full mind to his correspondents. He may have been too self-important, or too hesitating. His confidence may have been real so far as it went, and yet have had reservations. Memoranda for his own use would be certain to record correctly things done, but might well be silent about motives. It is safe to assume that he would not state a thing which is in any way to his own discredit, unless it were true. Many other such suggestions might be made as to historical judgement of a statesman's

correspondence ; but it is sure to be of real value, if not for ascertaining facts, for converting the dry record of facts into a living picture. We know far more of Bismarck or of Metternich, we can better understand the motives, and judge the methods, of their policy, than would have been possible without Busch's *Life of Bismarck* and Metternich's autobiography. Napoleon was primarily a man of action, but no one can estimate the man himself, his astonishing powers and equally conspicuous limitations, who has no knowledge of his correspondence. For English history this form of evidence is especially valuable, because of the unfortunate practice that long prevailed, of statesmen regarding the papers that came into their hands officially as their own private property, remaining in their hands after they had ceased to hold office. Much light was thrown on the policy of Pitt in the Seven Years' war by the publication of the memoirs of Hardwicke, who was Lord Chancellor in the same administration, and Pitt's trusted friend.

It is of course possible that private letters may contain some admission of wrongdoing, which would bring ordinary mortals to social disgrace or even within the grasp of the law, which in the case of great personages concerns history. If such letters fall into hostile hands, they may be used for political purposes : and the obvious defence is to deny their

genuineness, while the equally obvious temptation to the enemy is to strain their meaning to the worst. The historical inquirer is thus forced to consider what in strictness is hardly an historical question, whether any such letters were really written by the person to whom they were imputed. He may be aided in forming a conclusion by considerations of probability: are there, or are there not, other circumstances which render the accusation likely? Fundamentally, however, it ought to be a question for experts, though unfortunately the chances are greatly against papers of historical interest having ever been subjected to expert examination.

No better illustration can be found of the problems which history must consider when compromising papers are produced, nor indeed of the difficulties encountered in dealing with all documents strictly so called—writings which contain statements as to historical facts, but are not in the form of historical narrative—than that furnished by the famous Casket letters. Mary Queen of Scots, three months after the murder of her husband Darnley, married the Earl of Bothwell who had been active in the murder. Very soon afterwards the Scotch nobles rose in arms, deposed and imprisoned Mary. The next year Mary escaped and fled into England, appealing to Queen Elizabeth for support against her rebellious subjects. Elizabeth challenged the

Scotch lords to show cause why she should not restore Mary to her throne, whereupon the lords asserted that they had proofs in Mary's own hand that she had been concerned in the murder of Darnley. The proofs consisted in a series of letters found in a silver box belonging to Bothwell, which fell into their hands at the time of Mary's deposition, and had been talked about ever since, though they had not been produced. Elizabeth ordered an inquiry to be held, but, for a variety of reasons which it would be irrelevant to dwell on here, this came practically to nothing. Hence the Casket letters were not subjected to the scrutiny of a real judicial tribunal, still less to such thorough and impartial examination as would be afforded to them, if they could be adduced as evidence before an English court of justice at the present day. History has therefore only the documents themselves, or rather copies of originals which have long since disappeared, and some collateral testimony, without the advantage of having had either thoroughly tested at the time. Thanks however to the political interests involved in Mary's fall, and to the attraction which her remarkable personality has always exercised, all the facts relating to the Casket letters, as bearing upon the crucial point of her career, have been minutely discussed from every point of view. Unless new material comes

to light, the historical inquirer may feel sure that he has before him not merely the papers themselves, and the external facts relating to them, but everything which critical ingenuity can suggest as argument for and against the accusation based on them.

The principal points are as follows :—

1. The letters were produced by Mary's enemies. This suggests the need of special care in weighing the evidence as to their genuineness.

2. The contents were talked about immediately after Mary's deposition, and copies were sent to the French court. This suggests very serious difficulty in the way of the contention that they were altogether forgeries.

3. Of the letters, which were written in French, only copies survive, and of two only translations. This is however only a difficulty in the way of modern criticism of their language: there is no doubt that originals once existed. But it does render more tenable the contention, which finds much favour at the present day, that letters really written by Mary were tampered with by her enemies.

4. The letters, as we have them, are neither signed, addressed, nor dated, facts which naturally invite suspicion. This doubtless made it easier for Mary to deny that she had written them: but her denial is no more than the ordinary plea of 'not

guilty '—to have done otherwise would have been to confess the crimes imputed to her. The handwriting of the originals closely resembled Mary's, in the opinion of those who saw them: but a forger would have imitated her hand, and there was of course nothing like the careful examination by experts to which similar documents would be subjected nowadays. On the other hand, if Mary had really carried on a guilty correspondence with Bothwell, it would have been an obvious precaution not to sign or address her letters. Investigation as to Mary's doings, as known from other sources, does not seem to disclose any inconsistency in detail, either with the theory of their being written to Bothwell, or with the facts incidentally referred to in the letters. Such inconsistencies, it may fairly be said, would probably have occurred if the letters were forged, unless the forger had been extraordinarily skilful and most minutely acquainted with everything that Mary did. Their absence however goes but a little way: fortune might have favoured the forger.

5. Here and there in the letters persons are referred to, but not named. Obviously no identifications of such persons would be suggested that were not plausible, but it does not follow that they are certain: nor is the identification of much consequence. Here again it is plain that if the letters were genuine, it would be a very natural precaution

for the writer to avoid giving names if sure that the reader would understand: but the fact that names are omitted is of no value as positive testimony for or against the genuineness of the letters.

6. Of the letters one only is damning as evidence, the others being comparatively innocent and trifling. It may be fairly argued that not one of them except No. 2 was worth forging: but on the other hand it can be, and is, suggested that No. 2 was forged, or tampered with, and introduced among genuine letters.

7. The accounts given of the contents of the principal letter, by persons who claimed to have seen it very soon after Mary's fall, differ in some respects from the language of the document itself.

Are the discrepancies too great for mere inaccurate memory?

Or were the letters wilfully misrepresented then?

Or had they seen some paper other than the letter ultimately produced?

Or was the letter tampered with at the last moment?

Sundry other explanations may be suggested, but all are alike conjectural.

The actions of Mary, her friends and her enemies, during the time when Elizabeth's abortive inquiry was pending and was proceeding, are known, and some of them are suggestive. They throw, however,

no light on the specific question of the authorship of the Casket letters, whatever may be inferred from them on the general question of Mary Stuart's guilt or innocence.

The Casket letters serve also to point a moral in relation to historical evidence which should be obvious, but in the heat of controversy is often forgotten. If they were genuine, Mary Stuart is convicted under her own hand of murder and adultery. But if they were forged by her enemies, as her partisans affirmed, does it follow that Mary was innocent? In a legal trial, where a decision must be given one way or the other, and the burden of proof is on the prosecution, the court is bound to reject a document the genuineness of which is not proved to its satisfaction. If Mary Stuart had been adequately tried, the Casket letters would in all probability have been rejected on the ground that the authorship was not fully proved. And since it is in human nature to look with suspicion on the whole of a case which breaks down in one important part, since also the very theory of a criminal trial is that the prosecution must prove its accusation, she would pretty certainly have been acquitted without much attention being paid to the other evidence. Such a verdict, however, is not the judgement of a court of inquiry, but an act of judicial procedure; it is merely a declaration that

the prosecution has not succeeded in establishing its case. The acquitted person may be innocent, or may be only fortunate: indeed he may, or may not, according to the judicial system of the country where the trial takes place, be liable to be tried a second time on the same charge. The historian is in a different position from the judge, because his verdict entails no practical consequences. Whatever opinions he may form as to the genuineness of a given document, or the truth of a given statement, they need not and should not disturb his judgement as to the other testimony available in the matter before him. It is perfectly natural that Mary Stuart's defenders should make the most of the dubiousness of the Casket letters, since nothing else affords conclusive proof of her guilt. It would however be bad historical judgement to be led astray by their advocacy. There are other things besides the Casket letters which point to the conclusion that Mary Stuart was concerned in Darnley's murder. What should be the verdict of the historical inquirer on this other evidence is a question on which opinions may well differ: but any one who, believing the letters to be forged, thought that Mary's innocence was thereby established, would betray ignorance of the principles of historical evidence. He would be like the apologist of the Borgias who, because modern science deems in-

credible some of the stories about their methods of poisoning, argued that this proved conclusively that they never poisoned any one.

One is tempted at first to dismiss with contempt all documents, of whatever description, which prove on critical examination not to be what they profess to be. They are forgeries, it may be said, and are merely to be deducted from the mass of genuine matter. In the modern world the weapons for the detection of any such fraud are many and effective. The invention of printing paved the way, and the steady growth of publicity for everything of general interest has made it more and more difficult to give any semblance of reality to a forged historical document. There have been instances of literary forgery, done from personal motives which it would be irrelevant to discuss, such as the supposed Epistles of Phalaris and poems of Ossian. And of course there are avowed romances in autobiographical form, like *Esmond*, or biographies which as a literary device are supposed to be written by the subjects of them, like Jomini's life of Napoleon: such things have no shade of deception intended. Hence the historical student who is dealing with anything like recent times has practically no need to think of the possibility of forgeries.

In the ancient world, and even in the middle ages,

things were entirely different. It does not follow that the standard of truthfulness was lower, but that it was differently understood. Thucydides has the highest reputation for carefulness and fair-mindedness as an historian: yet his work is full of speeches put into the mouths of the personages who figure in his narrative. It is true that he habitually introduces them by saying that Pericles or Nicias spoke to the following effect (τοιάδε, not ταῦτα), and that the diction is obviously the same whoever is the orator. It is true also that the arguments are such as would naturally have been used, and that under the conditions of that age the drift of an important oration would in all probability have been remembered. But the point is that they are given as the speeches actually delivered, and that it was then accepted as a natural and honest thing for an historian to write such speeches, whereas in modern days he would not profess to give a statesman's speech at length, unless he could quote from an authentic report. All the Roman historians do the same thing: in fact there is no question that in classical times no one dreamed of objecting to this practice as being a departure from the truth.

The Old Testament presents us with very similar cases. There is no reason to impute any *mala fides* to the author of the Book of Proverbs, for instance, because he represents king Solomon as the actual

author of the book in which are collected the wise sayings ascribed to him, and for all we know to the contrary actually uttered by him. When the book of Psalms was compiled, there is no reason to suppose that there was any dishonest purpose in calling them by the name of David, the author of a certain number of them. In nearly all the New Testament epistles the text contains an author's name: but critical objections have been urged, and in one instance at least are generally held to be sound, against the belief that they were really written by the apostles whose names they bear. It does not however follow that there was any intention to obtain better authority for their contents than would have attached to them if no name had been inserted. Their importance follows from their having been admitted into the Canon of the New Testament, not from the names of the ostensible authors. Even if we allow that criticism has been entirely successful in disproving the reputed authorship, they contain what in the judgement of the actual writers St. Peter or St. Paul would naturally have said. As documents, they correspond to the nearly contemporary speeches ascribed by Tacitus to Agricola and his Caledonian enemy before the decisive battle.

Opinions may of course differ greatly as to the evidential value of a pseudonymous book, or of the speeches given by Thucydides and Livy: and

these opinions will, at any rate in relation to the Old Testament, be largely based on linguistic criticism. All that the historical student need bear in mind is that what in our times would be regarded as fraudulent, and therefore destructive of any historical value, was in the ancient world a recognized practice.

The same considerations apply in their degree to the historical books of the Old Testament, and to many mediaeval chronicles, which in their present form are compilations. A later writer embodied what he thought fit of what his predecessors had written, without any thought of appropriating their labours, the books indeed being mostly anonymous. These however, being composed with a definite historical purpose, cannot be classed among documents in the narrower sense.

There are other mediaeval writings of which it must be said that they were forgeries, since they were concocted with a deliberate purpose. According to the False Decretals, for instance, the claims of the Church to temporal dominion, and of the Popes to absolute supremacy within the Church, were fully recognized in earlier ages, which as a matter of fact knew nothing of them. It may be doubted whether the compilers of these documents were consciously fraudulent, in the sense of bolstering up by these means claims which they knew to be

invalid. They may perhaps have persuaded themselves that they were only making a formal record of things which must have happened centuries before, and that in support of a just cause this was permissible. But the documents set forth at one time or another by the Popes contain too many deliberate misstatements for the historian to accept any such plea, except in mitigation of sentence. It was doubtless the revival of learning, which made it more difficult to delude mankind into admitting untenable claims, that put an end to this mode of upholding them.

Perhaps the latest instance analogous to the False Decretals was *Eikon Basilikē*, a book purporting to be written by Charles I near the end of his life, and published some time after his execution. It was intended to serve as a manifesto in favour of the royalist cause, and produced some effect. The real author was afterwards rewarded by Charles II with a bishopric. How is *Eikon Basilikē* to be classed? It certainly was not the work of Charles I, as pretended. It certainly was advocacy of views which Charles I had at heart. Was it an honest literary device, like Pericles' funeral oration in Thucydides? Or was it an impudent fraud perpetrated to serve a political purpose? Perhaps our judgement can hardly ignore the fact that it made the author's fortune.

CHAPTER VI

INDIRECT SOURCES OF INFORMATION

INDIRECT sources of information respecting historical matters serve two purposes. They are supplementary to written records or corrective of them: and they also tell us something about times and peoples concerning which no written records exist. They may for convenience be divided into four groups—physical facts, non-historical literature, results of archaeological investigation, and myth or legend. The first of these can give reasonable certainty, but chiefly of a negative kind: if a thing is physically impossible one must reject a statement that it happened. The second is obviously valueless for direct information as to facts, but may furnish much material to the historian who is striving to form a general picture of the age to which it belongs. The third deals in one sense with facts. There is no doubt of the existence of all sorts of material relics of the past. Conjectures as to the import of them may have any degree of solidity, but in themselves are merely conjectures. The last consists of matter avowedly fabulous, and can of itself do nothing for history, though when studied in con-

nexion with language and other survivals from the past it can furnish useful data.

1. Physical facts which have an historic bearing are mainly geographical, in the widest sense of that term. Science has discovered indications of vast changes in the earth's surface, some the result of a sudden catastrophe, most of them operating gradually through long ages. A few of these may come within the ken, if not of history proper, yet of investigations into the physical conditions under which history began. From the point of view of evidence, however, we have only to think of things as they are. We know the general configuration of the earth, and have explored the whole of its surface, save a few exceptions which for historical purposes may be ignored. Hence we can measure distances, and judge whether statements contained in historical narrative are consistent with ascertained facts. We know the structure of mountain barriers and the course of rivers, and can thence obtain data for forming opinions about such matters as the original peopling of Europe by races still nomad. The results deduced from physical facts in this way are scarcely separable from the evidence derivable from the signs of their presence left by such people, and are indeed in some respects inferior in value to them. Probably the most effective use that can be made of physical facts is to employ

them for supplementing, and if necessary correcting, historical narratives which in themselves lack preciseness. Cases of this kind belong to ancient or to mediaeval history. It is only in comparatively recent times that historical writers have been able, or have been expected, to be habitually precise on such matters. In relation to earlier times we have, as is pointed out elsewhere, imperfect information as to the opportunities enjoyed by the writers whose works we possess. In some instances we have good reason to think that they could not have obtained more precise knowledge ; in others we can only say that as a matter of fact they do not exhibit it. In all alike we can with advantage use our fuller information as to physical facts so as to supply the deficiencies, or to go so far towards achieving this as the circumstances of each case allow. A couple of instances, taken one from ancient history, and one from mediaeval, will amply illustrate the mode in which assistance may be rendered by physical facts to historical inquiry.

Among the problems presented by ancient history there are few which have been more vigorously discussed than that of Hannibal's passage of the Alps. The fact that he did convey an army over from the Rhone into the basin of the Po is undoubted : the question is by what route he crossed. The evidence on which an answer may be based is

probably complete, in the sense that no new items will come to light, and is of various kinds, none of it even approximating to certainty, but affording reasonable grounds for an opinion. There are two direct narratives by historians, neither of them contemporary, but both having had access to information no longer extant. Polybius, who was born just before the end of the second Punic War, says that he himself crossed the Alps by Hannibal's route: but he mentions very few names, and his descriptive language is rather vague. Hence parties to the controversy, with strong opinions of their own as to which was actually Hannibal's route, have cited Polybius as their authority for very diverse views. Livy, who wrote nearly two centuries after the event, had certainly read, for he quotes on another point, a Roman writer who was Hannibal's prisoner. Like many other historians, he introduces much detail for the sake of picturesque effect: and there is certainly one item in this particular narrative, the famous vinegar story, which is absurd. This has perhaps thrown an undue amount of discredit on his account: but it is quite clear that he supposed Hannibal to have crossed somewhere towards the southern end of the chain. Trouble has been taken to attach precise meaning to every expression of both authors, in the attempt to make their narratives correspond to geographical

facts, but much of this has been wasted labour. They had no accurate geographical knowledge, and we cannot reasonably assume that they, or other writers who make casual mention of Hannibal's passage, the exact signification of whose words is disputable, intended to write with the precision of a modern geographical textbook. There are also historical facts, as distinguished from direct narratives, from which inferences may be drawn. It is quite certain that the Gauls had flooded north Italy some three centuries before Hannibal, which meant that they were familiar with one or more passes across the western Alps, though there is nothing to show exactly which they were. The Romans had become more or less dominant in the basin of the Po before the second Punic war, which must have meant a general knowledge of the existence of routes into Gaul, whether any Roman had ever used them or not. Scipio, Hannibal's opponent on the Rhone, when he found that the Carthaginian army was committed to crossing the Alps, brought his troops back to Italy by sea and took post on the Ticino to wait for it. This was the natural thing to do if he knew that access to the plain of the Po might be obtained via several of the mountain valleys, but was throwing away an important advantage (the chance of fighting before Hannibal reached the open plain, where the famous African

cavalry would have free play) had he thought that Hannibal must needs descend on Turin. At a later date the Romans made regular roads over two of the passes, which affords a presumption that these were in familiar use beforehand, but hardly warrants the inference that they knew no others. The names, again, of the Gallic tribes mentioned can be identified with certain localities, but this does not show that they never changed their abodes, or even that Livy got hold of the right names. Inferences based on the nomenclature are fair presumptions, but no more.

It does not however follow that there are no materials for approaching more nearly to a definite solution of the problem. We have now accurate maps: we know every possible route across the western Alps, and can measure the actual distances, so as to compare them with the times given by the historians for the different stages of Hannibal's journey. We can say that it is physically impossible that Hannibal can have used certain passes, they being too lofty, or too rough, for elephants and horses. We can eliminate other routes as being too lengthy for the time which, if we know anything at all, we know that he actually expended. We can thus reduce the number of possible alternatives within very narrow limits. As a matter of fact, those who know the topography best, and most fully understand the conditions of mountain travel,

are more or less agreed that Hannibal must have crossed by one of two passes, the Mt. Genèvre or the Col de l'Argentière, near the southern end of the great barrier between Gaul and Italy. Those who believe in a passage further north tend to lay less stress on the physical conditions, more on the exact words of the two historians. Such being the case, it is plain that a certain conclusion cannot be reached: the controversy must remain open. Though any student may fairly form a decided opinion, and give his reasons for it, he cannot deny that there are arguments which point to another view. At the same time, unless physical facts had been adduced, by way of commentary on the historical narratives, we could not have gone further than to be satisfied that the thing happened, that the passage was made by some route or other.

In the case of Hannibal's passage of the Alps physical facts supplement the meagreness of the only narratives which we possess, but do not contradict them. They merely limit the interpretations which can be put on their vague or incomplete statements. Another illustration may serve as a more direct warning that it is well, before laying stress on authorities, to ascertain whether their statements come within the range of physical possibility. The chroniclers who record the battle of Hastings with one voice affirm that Harold had

constructed artificial defences for the position in which he awaited attack. Professor Freeman in his *History of the Norman Conquest*, relying on the chroniclers, says that there was a triple palisade, 'firm barricades of ash and other timber, wattled in so close together that not a crevice could be seen.' Other writers have held that the language of the chroniclers could be interpreted to signify merely the 'shield-wall', the interlocked shields used by the Norsemen standing on the defensive—a method which would be natural to Harold's house-carls, who were Anglo-Danes. Whether the latter view is tenable in face of the plain meaning of the words used by the chroniclers—they, it should be remembered, if contemporaries, were very far from being eyewitnesses—whether the facts of the battle do not go to prove that there was some kind of artificial defence, these are matters of opinion. The physical facts of the ground, however, have an important bearing on the controversy. They make it certain that there could have been no timber at hand sufficient to construct even a fraction of what is described. Moreover the very short time during which Harold occupied the position would not have sufficed to set up such defences even if timber had been collected beforehand, which under the circumstances is inconceivable. If there was a palisade at all, it can only have been a flimsy thing, an

awkward obstacle to the Norman horsemen charging uphill, but not a barrier against them. That is to say, the chroniclers must at least have exaggerated greatly, and laying stress on their exact language is wasted labour.

It may be useful to add that physical facts must be accurately known before they can be relied on for purposes of historical evidence. Though the main features of the earth's surface are permanent from the point of view of human history, though changes of minor importance are in general very slow in coming to pass, yet there are exceptions. The sea has considerably receded in some quarters, encroached in others. A traveller not acquainted with these changes would find himself believing, on the evidence of his own senses, that the most heroic story in ancient history, the Spartan defence of Thermopylae, was an absurd fable, that the crusade of St. Louis could not possibly have started from Aigues Mortes. The hand of man also has done something. The clearing away of forests has affected climate, and accelerated the silting up of not a few harbours and river mouths. Poole harbour as it is to-day could not have sent out an appreciable contingent of ships to fight the Spanish Armada. Erecting dikes to keep out the sea and reclaim fen land has perhaps done more. The Angle and Danish invasions of this island belong

to an age of which written records are scanty. Any one who reads with a modern map the accounts given of them would declare them scarcely intelligible, if he was ignorant of the vast physical changes wrought in the fen country within comparatively recent times.

Though physical facts, if accurately known, are occasionally of real historical value in showing that what profess to be records of past events cannot be correct, it does not therefore follow that such records are confirmed, if on investigation the physical facts do not contradict them. If scientific calculation is to be trusted, an eclipse did actually take place about the time when Thales is said to have predicted one. But it would be faulty logic to argue that this proved the story of Thales to be true: it is not demonstrably false, and that is all that can be inferred from this one fact. The pass of Thermopylae, however things have altered since, is believed on scientific judgement to have been, twenty-four centuries ago, in the state in which Herodotus describes it. This shows that it was not physically impossible for the 300 Spartans to have held it for a time against the Persian army, but it does not prove that they actually did so. The illogical nature of such assumptions is so obvious, that it might seem hardly worth while to point out their fallaciousness. But it is in human nature

to discredit other arguments against a given statement when one which if sound would have overthrown it is shown to be untenable. Even this falls short of the gross fallacy of regarding a positive assertion to be proved true[1] by the mere fact that an argument negativing it has broken down.

2. General literature if used with discrimination may be of great value to the historian for the second and more interesting part of his task, though it is of little use for the earlier stage of determining what did in fact happen. It is the chief source, if not the only one, whence he can learn the ideas, tendencies, and general social conditions of the age which he is studying. The existence of the evidence is unquestionable: the one difficulty is to estimate the quantity, as distinguished from the quality, of the influence represented by a given author or

[1] It is a known fact that the shores of the Gulf of Lyons, for many miles on each side of the mouth of the Rhone, have changed considerably within times geologically recent, and to a certain extent since the beginnings of history. According to an ancient Christian legend, Lazarus and his two sisters came from Palestine to Gaul, and introduced Christianity there. If the state of the coast in the first century A.D. was widely different from what it is at present, some supposed traces of their landing cannot, it has been urged, be authentic. I have seen it gravely argued in print that because scientific evidence led to the conclusion that the changes traceable on the coast east of the Rhone took place earlier than the first century, this proved the legend of Lazarus and his sisters to be true.

group of authors. An epoch-making book in the higher spheres of thought, in religion or philosophy or abstract science, may be strictly original, or it may merely crystallize what is already floating in solution. The historical inquirer will probably be content without attempting to resolve the doubt, will note that with the publication of a book like Rousseau's *Contrat Social* or Darwin's *Origin of Species* a new force began to operate in the world of thought, and point out how, after a given lapse of time, the ideas represented by it became more and more powerful.

The historian's task is easier with literature of a less solid character: he cannot mistake the nature of the tendencies, moral or intellectual, appearing in it, though he needs care in estimating their strength. Some books of course stand apart as exhibiting qualities not typical but individual: no one could imagine the savage misanthropy of *Gulliver's Travels*, for instance, to be representative of anything but a single man's nature. As a rule, however, literature, whether it be idealistic poetry or direct pictures of life and manners, describes what is prevalent in the age of the writer: most of it would in fact be meaningless otherwise. On the other hand it can seldom present more than one side of the truth, and other sides may or may not be portrayed with equal literary vigour. We need

not disbelieve Juvenal's indictment against the manners and morals of imperial Rome because the same age produced men like Agricola. The *Faerie Queene* embodies the ideals of an age in which indefinitely great things seemed possible, however few there may have been to share those ideals. It also exhibits the debt which English literature owed to Italy, though the same generation produced writers who owed nothing to that source. When the *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Hudibras*, *Paradise Lost* and Wycherley's comedies all appeared within the space of a few years, the historian cannot be mistaken in concluding that the England of Charles II's reign was deeply divided between the Puritan spirit and the reaction against it, whether or not materials fail him for judging to which side the balance inclined. Sir Roger de Coverley was a life-like portrait, however many or few of the country squires of Queen Anne's time were really like him. The genteel society of Jane Austen's novels was really imbued with the principles and prejudices which she describes, whether such society was widely extended or not. When Smollett depicts the brutalities of eighteenth-century life in the navy, or Dickens the abuses in workhouses, no one need doubt that the evils existed in a greater or less degree. Crimes happen, violent passions are roused, occasionally in ordinary life; but it is

because they furnish effective incidents, not because they are really of perpetual occurrence, that they fill the pages of the novelist. For ordinary purposes one is content to realize that the shield has more than one side. The historian, if he wishes to make his picture faithful, will go as much further as his materials permit, in order to discover the relative strength and importance of the many diverging, perhaps conflicting, tendencies.

There is of course some literature which has descended from ages devoid of written history, and like archaeology, tells something at least of the times to which it belongs. The most familiar instance is the Homeric poems, and they may well serve to illustrate the nature and value of the service which such literature renders to history. Controversy has long been vehement as to their authorship, their date, their every attribute: but no one doubts that they depict life as the writers knew it. Whether Agamemnon was a real personage or not, whether there ever was a Greek expedition against Troy, whether if so the Trojans and their neighbours were akin to the Greeks or not, whether later influences did or did not modify the original lays, are questions about which argument is reasonable, and opposing conclusions tenable. All however assume—and without such an assumption the controversies would be almost meaningless—that

the *Iliad* is a real picture of life and manners. There may be inconsistencies here and there, suggesting that certain passages were interpolated at a later date when conditions had changed: but these are matters of detail. Substantially the *Iliad* is accepted as portraying in a coherent manner a state of things long antecedent to historical Greece. We can trace the relations between the chiefs and their followers and between man and woman, the arms and mode of fighting, the dress and food and funeral ceremonies, the simple anthropomorphism which clothes the gods with human passions, if with superhuman powers. Let it be admitted that we cannot verify: our picture of the Homeric age is of uncertain date, and based on inferences from the poems which may conceivably be modified by future archaeological discoveries, and are not now universally believed. Still, as with the traditional history of Rome, we have this or nothing: we must accept it *quantum valeat*, or else—darkness.

3. Archaeology, if we use the word in the widest sense, deals with all the material remains left by past ages. For historical times properly so called, those about which reasonably trustworthy historical narratives exist, the surviving buildings and works of art serve much the same purpose as non-historical literature. They may incidentally furnish items of evidence checking or amplifying specific statements

made by the possibly meagre direct authorities. Mainly however they serve to give life and colour to the pictures outlined in narrative. We realize much better the Athens whose political development and decline Thucydides recounts, through having the Parthenon surviving, as well as through the comedies of Aristophanes and the works of the great tragedians. The Palatine hill and the Forum supply a commentary on many things in Livy and Cicero. The great churches and castles of France and England, whether ruined or still standing in all their glory, the art of Giotto and Michelangelo, enable us to understand better the ages to which they belonged.

The chief importance of archaeology however lies in the information that it affords concerning ages and peoples for which no genuine history, no consecutive narrative based on anything like contemporary testimony, is available. It collects and interprets the inscriptions which represent the earliest attempts made by man to make any record of events, collating as often as possible those found in different countries. Something has been said in the last chapter about inscriptions, as being documents intended to convey historical information. Here it is only necessary to add that in practice it is difficult to separate them from the other material relics of the past. The temples and pyramids of

Egypt, the more recently unearthed palaces of Mycenae and Knossos, disclose a state of civilization long vanished, of which we should know nothing if we had only books to inform us: without the inscriptions only vague surmises would be possible as to the epoch and duration of these past splendours, whereas from their language some data of chronology at least can be obtained. Where there are no inscriptions it is a natural inference, though not a conclusive one, that the builders were unacquainted with writing: at any rate they have left much more scope for conjecture. If the men who built Stonehenge had covered the stones with writing, as has been done with many prehistoric remains of the eastern Mediterranean basin, we might probably know the purpose for which it was erected, which, as it is, can only be guessed. Even much humbler survivals, like the remains of the lake-dwellings, indicate much as to the state of civilization reached by their builders, as to their domestic animals, the arts with which they were acquainted, their knowledge or ignorance of the use of metals. Their burying places tell with certainty the stature and shape of skull of the men that used them, perhaps the colour of hair and skin, and thus supply information, more or less definite, as to their ethnic relations. Experts further deduce, from implements and other things found in the tombs, inferences as to the

religious beliefs of the people buried in them—inferences which are obviously conjectural, but which are rendered at least probable when proper use is made of the comparative method.

For instance, those who have carefully studied and measured Stonehenge see reason for believing that it was a vast temple for sun-worship. If Stonehenge stood alone, a critic would be justified in saying that the orientation, which certainly suggests sun-worship, may have been a mere coincidence. When however it is found that other monuments, belonging apparently to the same age and race, exhibit the same peculiarities, the inference is greatly strengthened. Indeed probably no one who has studied the question really doubts that the builders of Stonehenge were sun-worshippers, even though it be admitted that this does not go far, sun-worship having been so widespread among savage races, and so diverse in its forms. Similarly it is easy to establish such conclusions of fact as that whole races practised certain forms of burial, while others burned their dead. Inferences as to the religious beliefs which led, it is assumed, to these diverse practices are natural and legitimate: but it must always be remembered that, however probable they seem, they are essentially conjectural. These things are perhaps not strictly speaking historical: but they furnish the materials from

which to gather some idea, more or less definite according to circumstances, of the state of the world at the time when written history begins. Hence they cannot be ignored in discussing the various forms of evidence available for historical purposes.

It must of course be borne in mind that an ancient work of art, however distinctly commemorative of a particular event, is not in itself evidence that the event was historical and not fabulous, unless indeed it can be shown to be contemporary. It merely proves, like a written narrative which has no known contemporary source, that what it commemorates was at a later date believed to have really happened. For instance, the archaic bronze figure of the wolf and the twins, now in the Capitoline museum at Rome, proves only that the story of Romulus was currently believed when the figure was made. And this was nearly 500 years after the traditional date of Romulus' birth, if, as seems probable, the figure can be identified with one recorded as having been dedicated in 296 B.C. We need not go into the question whether the exploits of William Tell were historical, or specimens of folklore. But we should be greatly mistaken if we imagined the great statue of William Tell at Altdorf to be any evidence in favour of their historical character, any more than Schiller's drama which bears his name.

4. Tradition, as we have seen, tends rapidly to degenerate, and after a time is not practically distinguishable from legend. The theoretic difference between them would seem to be, that tradition contains a true story which has been gradually, and involuntarily, perverted into fiction, while legend is a story about some real personage or event, which was set afloat under one of many possible influences, but is in itself untrue. The Roundway Down tradition already mentioned may serve as an example of the one. The story of Frederick Barbarossa's magic sleep, also mentioned before in another connexion, is an instance of a legend due to the innate hopefulness of human nature. The legend that Pontius Pilate, after a lifetime of remorse, drowned himself in a lake on the mountain overlooking the lake of Lucerne that seems to bear his name, originated in a misunderstanding of the real name[1] of the mountain. Other legends may have arisen through attributing to individuals what was really the act of a whole tribe, or through a family seeking to glorify itself in the name of a former member. Early Roman history is full of stories which the Niebuhrian school confidently

[1] Mons Pileatus, the mountain with a cap on, was a most appropriate name for a lonely mountain which in the finest weather is rarely without a cloud round its summit: and this was easily transformed into Mons Pilatus.

ascribed to some such origin, and it is certainly impossible to prove that they were wrong, as impossible as to prove that they were right.

Legend again cannot, for evidential purposes, be distinguished from myth or folklore, though it is possible to do so in theory. Myths are commonly taken to be fables meant to explain natural phenomena, which are by primitive superstition ascribed to supernatural beings, while the term legend is applied to stories about persons who were, or are supposed to have been, real human beings. It is evident that both alike have the same meaning for historical purposes: they show what were the notions current among this or that people before the dawn of history. And if they are found among very diverse peoples, they at least suggest the probability of these peoples having had a common origin.

Myth and legend in fact serve much the same purpose as the subjects of archaeological research. They furnish materials for a picture of times otherwise unknown to history, a picture which can be filled in with more or less confidence according to the amount and character of the materials, but which can never be more than a sketch. And it is obvious that legendary materials are far less trustworthy than archaeological. The pyramids and the tumuli, the pieces of pottery and of sculpture,

actually exist: whether the indications furnished by them are clear or dubious, there is no doubt about the things themselves. A legend, on the other hand, may or may not have been indefinitely altered in the course of oral transmission: all that survives is the form which it had assumed when ultimately it was committed to writing.

CHAPTER VII

PROBABILITY

In all matters depending on human testimony the question of probability may arise—is the thing stated so far at variance with known facts, or with reasonable expectation, as to suggest a belief that the statement is untrue? This is especially important in historical inquiry, because so little of the testimony with which history deals is in the strict sense at first hand. At the same time it is a question about which no exact rules can be laid down. A statement made in an historical document may seem improbable for a variety of reasons, and in very varying degree. The document itself, apart from the particular statement, may have a more or less strong claim to be regarded as generally credible, according to its degree of proximity to the matters with which it deals. There is no doubt that improbability suggests some extra caution before a statement is accepted as true. Beyond that all depends on the nature of the alleged improbability, and also on the character of the document containing it.

History is full of events which were unexpected, even incalculable, beforehand, though there is no

doubt that they happened. For instance, who thirteen centuries ago would have imagined that a man was already beginning his career in a remote corner of the world, who was destined to transform a great part of human history, as Mohammed has done? Speculations as to how and why such things come to pass are perfectly reasonable, and even profitable: for our present purpose they merely enforce the lesson that *a priori* improbability is hardly a sufficient ground for rejecting an historical statement which is otherwise deemed worthy of belief.

An instructive illustration may be derived from the perennial controversy as to the authorship of Shakespeare's works. The appearance of a man of transcendent genius is of course a very rare event, though the age of Elizabeth was certainly not one in which such a genius would be specially unlikely to appear. At any rate there are the works, an enormous output, in quantity as well as in quality, for a single author. Literary critics have argued on various grounds, chiefly of internal evidence, that this or that particular play was not written by the author of the bulk of them, or was produced in collaboration with some one else. It would be obviously irrelevant to discuss here any of these doubtful questions: but if we accept the negative judgement as to every one of the disputed pieces,

it would still remain true that most of what all the world knows as Shakespeare's works was admittedly written by one man. But who was the man? This is, like most doubtful points of historical evidence, a question of what is to be believed on a matter of fact. Concerning William Shakespeare of Stratford-on-Avon, who is generally accepted as the author, certain things are known, and others are reported on somewhat vague testimony: and there are considerable gaps in even a conjectural biography of him. The facts known about him being such as they are, it is reasonably said to be very improbable that the Stratford Shakespeare should have been capable of writing a series of plays and poems which exhibit not only familiarity with every aspect of human nature, but more or less acquaintance with every form of culture then current. On the other hand the improbability is at least equally great (most people would say far greater) that the real author should have been a namesake otherwise unknown, or should have permanently succeeded in concealing his identity by publishing in a known man's name. Conjectures are easy, but none go far towards reducing the great inherent improbability. Nevertheless—and this is the essential thing from the point of view of historical evidence—one way or other a profoundly improbable thing did happen: for there are the plays.

The two questions, whether a thing did in fact happen, and what explanation is to be given of it, are of course theoretically quite separate, though in practice they are apt to be confused. The only true point of contact between them is that, if the evidence for the fact is not conclusive, an argument against its credibility may be deduced from the difficulty of explaining the supposed fact. As soon as it is admitted that the evidence is conclusive, the improbability becomes of no account, even though it be of such a character as to defy explanation. Take for example the famous story of the Man in the Iron Mask. That a man should have been kept in successive French prisons for some thirty-five years, under such exceptional precautions that not even the governor of the prison was told who he was, that no one was allowed to communicate with him or see his face, reads like a bit of sensational romance, Authentic state papers however not merely prove the truth of the main fact, but show clearly the dates and places, though the reticences and misstatements in some of them make inferences as to the identity of the prisoner very difficult, as was doubtless intended. Of the many conjectures that have been made, some are, or are said to be, inconsistent with known details. For instance, if the prisoner was consigned to his living tomb in 1669, it cannot have been a person who was free and at

mischief at a later date. But to argue that his life must have been of great contingent importance, or it would not have been preserved in an age when mere human life was not highly valued, deals only with a probability in the case, a real probability no doubt, were it not that men frequently fail to act as might have been expected of them. What concerns us here is not to suggest a solution of the problem, but to note that the mere improbability of a suggested solution is not a fatal objection to it, far less a reason for disbelieving the fact, however much it may defy explanation.

The question of probability is of course important mainly in dealing with historical authorities not in the first rank of proximity to events. When a statement is made by a real contemporary, we require something beyond mere intrinsic improbability to lead us to disbelieve it. No doubt it may happen that the improbability is the first thing to attract attention, and suggest a doubt ; but it need be of a very specific kind to justify going beyond a doubt. For instance, if an alleged fact can, from the nature of the case, have been known to one or two persons only, *a priori* improbability of the fact itself might fairly suggest hesitation about accepting it. But if these persons had an obvious motive for keeping anything of the kind secret if it did happen, one can hardly help inferring that

the statement was the invention of the writer or his informant, or at best based on rumour. This is of course only a presumption, which may be rebutted by other positive evidence: or again the statement may turn out to have been in fact true, though originally a mere guess.

We have seen already that where original authorities disagree in matters of fact, the historical inquirer must bring to bear whatever other considerations may in each case be available. The estimate which he has formed of the general trustworthiness of the rival authorities will doubtless be his chief guide: but in dealing with specific facts, as distinguished from generalizations of every kind, he may reasonably take probability into account. In doing so, however, it is necessary to bear in mind a consideration often forgotten. A witness who is doing his best to relate truthfully, will himself have been struck by the improbability of this or that which has come under his notice, and will be likely therefore to have taken additional pains to ascertain the truth. There is a maxim which used to be in vogue among scholars working at the text of classical authors, that in case of discrepant readings, preference should be given to the *difficilior lectio*. That is to say, an expression the meaning of which is not quite obvious is not likely to have been introduced into the manuscript in the process of copying from the

original: whereas the opposite process is only too easy, as any one who has often had manuscript type-written may very possibly have found out by experience. On the same principle, if we are satisfied of the bona fides of an historical authority, we may presume that a statement, in itself improbable, will not have been made lightly. He may have been misinformed, but he at any rate believed it on what seemed to himself adequate grounds. On the same principle, again, we incline to believe statements which run counter to the dominant ideas of the writer's age, or which relate to things in themselves so notorious and important that it is obvious that they could never have been related had they not been true. Nothing would appear more unlikely *a priori* than that an emperor of the character of Charles V should abdicate and retire into a convent when little past fifty years of age. But for that very reason we should feel sure, even had it been stated only by authorities of very secondary value, that he must in fact have done so. An historical authority may very possibly misinterpret things, the happening of which seem to him incomprehensible; but it would never enter his mind to invent them, and it would not be likely that he would himself believe them lightly, not until convinced against his instinctive judgement that they were in fact true.

Improbability is however one thing, impossibility is another. If a statement conflicts with physical facts, such things as time and distance, it cannot be true. Cases of the kind may occur in relation to historical matters, though perhaps not very often. For instance, a person may be said to have done something at a particular time and place, when it is known, on other authority, that he was a long way off at or near the alleged time. If the inquirer is satisfied that the other authority is trustworthy, he rejects the statement as either altogether false, or at best wrong in some of its details. For one class of documents this test is important. Mediaeval potentates moved about their dominions very freely, and transacted much of their business wherever they happened to be. The itineraries of some of these have been traced with great care in modern times, largely by means of documents executed by them at different places, about the genuineness of which there is no reasonable doubt. If other documents, alleged to have been executed by this or that prince, are dated in a manner inconsistent with his known movements, historical criticism will regard them as spurious, and thereby the value of any inferences from their contents will be reduced to a minimum. From the middle ages a number of charters and similar documents have descended to us, the contents of which may tell incidentally facts

of historical interest. Hence it may be of some little importance when it proves necessary to discard as spurious any such documents, because the materials for mediaeval history are none too abundant. Otherwise history has little need to trouble itself with statements which seem physically impossible. In modern times they would not be made, because their impossibility would be patent: in regard to ancient times there is rarely material for declaring them impossible.

The historical student must limit very narrowly the field of his inquiries, if he is to avoid all question about the miraculous. Hume's famous argument is that every miracle must be disbelieved, because it is more credible that all the witnesses to it, whatever their character, should be deceiving or deceived, than that a law of nature, which is known to be invariable, should in one instance be violated. Nowadays the wider range of knowledge enables us to deny Hume's major premiss, that the laws of nature are all known and all invariable. Every addition to our knowledge tells that there is more beyond. What seems violation of a known law may lead to the including of that law itself in a wider one. And the present time, when we have discovered radium but are only beginning to understand it, when investigation into mental phenomena, like suggestion and telepathy, has gone no further

than realizing that they are not mere impostures, is especially far from being able to adopt the easy-going theory that we know all about nature. In a generalized form, as a reminder that the improbability of a statement must be taken into account in weighing its evidential value, and that when the improbable rises to the impossible it must needs be rejected, Hume's argument is reasonable enough: in its original form it is untrue. At the same time the advance in various departments of knowledge gives the historian materials which enable him to go beyond Hume's rough and ready method. Criticism is gradually sifting historical documents, and the probability of the facts stated in them is an element in the calculation for determining their general credibility. If that must be rated low, the statements contained in them, whether so-called miracles or not, lose in value proportionately. If their credibility is rated high, it becomes more difficult to disparage any statement contained in them, whether it is called miraculous or not. Meanwhile the bounds of knowledge widen; the time may come when enough light has been obtained to show that not a few of the events recorded as miracles, which are now accepted by some, rejected by others, on grounds that seem to offer no opening for a common understanding, are really parts of a greater whole.

Care must be taken also to discriminate between real and spurious improbability. A thing is going to happen, and it may happen in one of many different ways. Before the event the chances against its happening in a particular way are considerable, and any one who predicted a given result would most probably be wrong. The thing happens in one way, through causes so complicated or so trivial that common language sums them up as luck or chance, and thenceforth the antecedent improbability vanishes. Four men are playing whist or bridge: it is many millions to one, always assuming fair play, against one of them naming beforehand the hand that he would next have dealt to him. The chances, before the dealing begins, are exactly the same against all possible combinations; but some one of the many millions possible must occur, and after the event no one will doubt that it has actually happened. Many people would disbelieve a man who said that he once had all the cards of a given suit dealt to him, on the ground that it was extremely improbable. What they really mean is that such a combination, though in itself neither more nor less likely to occur than any other, strikes the imagination, and therefore suggests a motive for inventing the statement that it did occur. The same holds good, though it is perhaps not so clearly visible, in more serious

matters. Suppose a boiler to explode, or some similar accident to occur, which caused the death of one person within reach, while others equally near escaped, no one would see any improbability in the fact when reported: and yet the chances beforehand were real against this particular man alone being the victim. Suppose a regiment were going into action under conditions which rendered it inevitable that it should suffer very heavily, and some one were to predict that *A*, *B*, and *C* would be the only officers to come out unhurt, it would be extremely improbable that his prediction should be verified. But after the action there would be no improbability in the statement that *A*, *B*, and *C* had escaped, rather than any other three officers. No amount of antecedent improbability of this kind will justify even a doubt of genuine evidence that the thing has happened.

At the same time it must be remembered that improbable things do happen. A mathematician would state without hesitation the odds, in some cases very heavy, against the gambler who stakes his money in this or that way at Monte Carlo. Yet some people take the risk and succeed, though many more fail. Something closely analogous may be traced in history: and from the nature of the case such things are more likely to occur in war than in peace. A commander in difficulties deter-

mines to try a desperate stroke: if he succeeds, we admire his skill or his courage, as the case may be, or possibly his luck. In modern times things are too public for any one to doubt that the deed was in fact done, even if there be some uncertainty about details. And when we are dealing with records of more distant times, we need not doubt of a story, assuming the record to be in itself generally trustworthy, merely for improbability of this type.

To take a modern instance, Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798 required a remarkable combination of circumstances, in order that it should reach its destination. It was known in England that a large force had been gathered at Toulon, though the specific object in view had not leaked out. Nelson with a few ships was already in the western Mediterranean, and a very large reinforcement was on its way, enough to enable him to destroy the French fleet, as he in fact did later at the battle of the Nile. Napoleon may have known of this reinforcement: at any rate he had good reason to judge that time was of importance. He could and did seize the first opportunity of leaving Toulon under weather conditions which rendered it certain that the British fleet, of which he knew neither the strength nor the exact position, could not immediately intercept him. From that point onwards, during a voyage of several weeks, including the halt to

capture Malta, he had to trust to luck, and did not trust in vain. It needed a combination of many circumstances to enable the French to reach Alexandria in safety. Nelson's flagship was damaged by a gale just at the wrong moment. An error of judgement due to an exaggerated report of this disaster prevented the very few vessels which he had available for scouting from rejoining him in time. He divined rightly the destination of the French, but had no positive information such as would have justified him in waiting off Alexandria when he had arrived there before them. He sailed westwards again in search of the enemy, and if the wind had been different, so as to cause either fleet to steer a very slightly different course, or if the weather had been perfectly clear, he would have encountered and destroyed them at sea. It would be futile to attempt to put into figures the chances against such a combination of circumstances; and yet if any one of them had fallen out differently, the total result would have been entirely changed. We do not however on account of this improbability disbelieve the narrative, which is fully authenticated.

To take an ancient instance, early Roman history tells the story of Horatius defending the bridge over the Tiber, a story of a brilliant exhibition of courage and self-devotion. Sceptics are quite within their rights, when they point out that no written records

are known to have existed till centuries later: the story must therefore have been handed down by tradition, and since it is notorious that tradition tends greatly to transform a story, the deed of Horatius is not reported by anything like trustworthy authority. They have however no right to say that it is too improbable to be believed: it stands or falls according to the amount of credence given to the story of early Rome as a whole, whatever that may be. One hardly need illustrate further the point that mere improbability is a consideration almost negligible when we are debating whether a given historical statement is or is not worthy of credence.

One case of discrepancy between original authorities deserves special mention. It occasionally happens that something is recorded as fact by one writer, and entirely ignored by another, which is of sufficient importance to modify the whole meaning of the transaction of which it forms part. If the authority who does not mention it must from the nature of the case have known the truth, the historical inquirer will usually judge that his silence is of more weight than the positive statement on the other side. Actors in public affairs may obviously have many motives for not stating the whole truth, which can hardly affect those who are merely chronicling events to the best of their power:

but it is equally obvious that such motives may not be traceable by the historian. Assuming however that he is satisfied that the authority who ignores the point in question can have had no reason to conceal the truth, the 'argument from silence' acquires very great force. Its meaning will perhaps be best seen from specific instances.

One excellent illustration is furnished by the battle of Crecy. According to a contemporary Italian historian whose general reputation stands high, the English had cannon at Crecy, and this was the first occasion on which they were used in war. The statement is not in itself incredible, and the Italian Villani could have had no conceivable motive for misrepresenting the truth: but no other contemporary authority says a word to the same effect. If it were a trifling detail, one might suppose that while one authority mentioned it, the others passed it over as insignificant. But when we examine the most detailed of the original narratives we find more than mere silence. Froissart, who took very great pains in collecting materials for his chronicle, and Baker of Swinbrook, who was more strictly contemporary and shows exceptional knowledge of the tactics of his time, describe the battle in a manner which leaves no room for cannon. The whole tenor of their narratives is to the effect that the battle was won entirely through the inherent

superiority of the longbow over all other missile weapons of the age, utilized to the full by the skilful tactics of Edward III. The conclusion is irresistible that the 'argument from silence' must prevail, that Villani must have been misinformed.

An illustration which works out to the opposite result, though this can hardly be maintained with equal confidence, is afforded by another battle, Dunbar, which was Cromwell's greatest military exploit. Cromwell perceived that, thanks to the faulty dispositions of the enemy and the formation of the ground, a complete victory was certain, if he could overpower the Scottish right. According to one of his officers, who wrote a very spirited account of the battle, he made a direct attack at daybreak, having previously sent a detachment to circle round a country house with extensive enclosed grounds, and fall simultaneously on the enemy's right flank. To carry out this turning movement accurately in the dark was an achievement of which even Cromwell might well be proud. There is however no mention of it in his full report addressed to the Speaker of the House of Commons. How is this discrepancy between two original authorities to be explained? Cromwell must have known the fact, and could have had no motive for concealing the truth: and it was too important to be treated as a trifling detail. Hence, on the strength of the 'argument

from silence' it has been thought that his subordinate Captain Hodgson must have been mistaken. Other evidence however has come to light of late years which is confirmatory of Hodgson's account. And though it is perhaps not easy to conjecture an explanation for Cromwell's silence, yet it cannot in this case be allowed to outweigh the positive evidence of other authorities.

It must not be forgotten that facts of human action are not isolated, but more or less connected, and that their probative force very often depends on this connexion. A particular fact suggests a given inference: other facts relating to the same persons or things suggest the same inference. The cogency of the inference is increased by each such addition. And though it would be meaningless to frame a quasi-mathematical formula indicating the rate of increase, yet it may safely be said to be more than simple addition.

In courts of justice, particularly in criminal trials, verdicts are very often given on what is termed circumstantial evidence, a number of separate indications pointing to the same conclusion, though none of them separately strong enough to compel it. A prisoner is on his trial for poisoning another person. There is no direct evidence, no one who saw him administer the poison: but there are

various items of fact proved which suggest that he did so. The accused had facilities for obtaining the poison: he was acquainted with the deceased, and was in his company about the time when the poison must have been administered: his business relations with the deceased were such that he would gain something by the death, and so forth. It is obvious that each one of these facts, taken separately, is perfectly consistent with the prisoner's innocence. The question is whether the cumulation of them, all of them consistent with his guilt though none of them inexplicable on some other supposition, is sufficient to satisfy the court. Each case of this type has of course to be judged on its own merits, and the details will differ greatly, though the underlying question of principle is the same. In practice a tribunal will not convict unless no reasonable doubt remains, though it will not refrain from so doing merely because ingenuity can suggest an imaginable alternative.

Closely analogous, though not absolutely identical with this legal process, is what is continually happening in matters of scientific and historical research. Certain scientific facts are observed, and a hypothesis is suggested to account for them. If it fits all the facts, it will be accepted, at any rate provisionally: that is to say, it will be treated as the probable explanation, but will be discarded if fresh

facts come to light that are irreconcilable with it, in which case a new hypothesis will be framed and similarly tested. On the same principle, if a number of separate bits of historical testimony point to a given conclusion, in support of which there is no direct evidence or none sufficiently cogent, the inquirer will have to consider, first whether these facts are enough to support a provisional verdict, secondly how far other facts, if any such are adduced and adequately attested, require at any rate a suspension of judgement. Take the massacre of St. Bartholomew as an illustration. There are many facts which point to the conclusion that there was a deliberate and carefully matured plot for taking the Huguenots off their guard, and destroying them unresisting, though perhaps no one among them is incapable of being otherwise interpreted. There are other facts, such as the notorious temper of the Paris mob, which suggest that the massacre may possibly have had a spontaneous origin, and was merely utilized by the hostile faction. If the former stood alone, it would be reasonable to say that the cumulation of accusing facts was enough to justify a confident judgement of condemnation. The question remains whether the countervailing facts are significant enough to modify that judgement.

The probative force of circumstances all pointing

towards a given conclusion, though each of them separately is compatible with a different one, has its counterpart on the negative side. If a narrative mentions several different circumstances, each of which is more or less improbable, the cumulation of them will very greatly strengthen the case for doubting the credibility of the narrative. It is mainly in dealing with historical authorities which are not thoroughly contemporary, that this argument has weight. We have no hesitation in believing a statement that a thing which happens very rarely did happen at a particular time and place, if we are satisfied that the person making the statement was himself trustworthy and had good means of knowing. But when we are dealing with second-hand authorities, as must frequently be the case in historical investigations, the case is altered. We may not have our inclination to believe a narrative, with reservation for doubt because it is not certainly based on contemporary testimony, shaken by its containing a single improbability. But when another is pointed out, the two improbabilities will, so to speak, be multiplied into each other, instead of being merely added together. This of course cannot be taken literally, but a sufficient cumulation of such reasons for doubt will compel us to disbelieve altogether. Cornewall Lewis, in discussing the credibility of early Roman history, points out

the amount of improbabilities accumulated in the account of the combat between the Horatii and Curiatii. According to the story each trio of brothers were born at a single birth, and they were near about the same age. The statistics quoted by Cornewall Lewis show that three males at a birth occur about once in 75,000 times. We have of course no knowledge whatever of the actual population of Rome or of Alba in the seventh century B.C., but on the ordinary average figures it would require a population of about 25,000 to each, that the case should occur once in a century, and the chances against this happening almost simultaneously in two such towns would again be considerable. To this it may be added that children so born are apt to be weakly, and very unlikely all to reach manhood. Moreover the murder of a sister by a brother, with which the story ends, is one of the rarest of crimes, as Cornewall Lewis also points out. Whether these cumulated improbabilities render the story incredible is a question on which all critics will not agree. But occurring as they do in a narrative for which we know of no contemporary authority, they at least justify the partial scepticism of judging that the story, as it appears in Livy, had been embellished in the process of oral transmission.

CHAPTER VIII

SPECIAL SOURCES OF ERROR

THERE are two sources of error in historical judgement of which separate notice should be taken: (1) tacitly assuming that all writers are or intend to be precise in their statements: (2) reading into the past the ideas of a later age.

Modern writers of historical narrative habitually aim at precision in matters of detail: and the facilities for obtaining information are great enough to make it reasonably easy to attain this end. There are of course many possibilities of error, but the authors intend both accuracy and fullness. This does not imply that they are all impartial, or even intend to be so: they may or may not draw unsound inferences from facts, or ignore matters that ought in fairness to be taken into account: and this may be either through bad judgement, or in order to set forth a partisan view. Still the facts themselves are meant to be truly stated, if only because, in face of the general publicity of things, the writer who has misrepresented them would inevitably lose credit. In other words, they may be of dubious value for the second stage of historical

inquiry, what do the facts mean, but they are on the whole trustworthy for the first stage, what on the available evidence were the actual facts.[1]

A military correspondent reporting a battle, for instance, sees it, from the nature of the case, from one side only: but he describes the exact position taken up by the army he is serving with, probably mentions the separate units of horse, foot and artillery that are engaged, notes the hour at which the various movements or encounters began and ended, observes the points at which the enemy is in view, estimates their number and (if his map does not indicate it with precision) their distance, states from information received or from his own inference, as the case may be, both the intentions of the side that takes the offensive and the obstacles to be overcome. He probably can only see a portion of the enemy at the outset: as fresh bodies come into view, he notes their apparent numbers. His aim is to record everything within his range of observation, the essential limit being that he cannot be in two places at once. From the narratives of

[1] All this applies, with even more force, to the newspaper reports, which are as it were the raw material of historical narrative nowadays. The first accounts of many things are imperfect: the 'yellow press' does not hesitate to publish false rumours and contradict them afterwards: facts and figures are cooked for partisan purposes. Yet, in spite of all, the material which the historian wants is forthcoming in full detail.

two capable war correspondents, one with each army, a fairly complete and correct account of the facts of a battle can usually be constructed. At any rate the intention is to do so as fully as comes within the resources of the persons concerned. On the other hand the meaning of it all will perhaps not be discernible: the strategic intentions of the generals on each side may not be fully disclosed till long afterwards, and without this knowledge a thorough judgement is impossible.

Similarly, in matters of peace, trained reporters describe every event of general interest, from a coronation to a football match, take down the public utterances of great personages, summarize parliamentary debates, gather all available information about a disaster like a shipwreck. If any detail is omitted by one, some rival is sure to supply it: if the report of a speech does not accurately reproduce what the orator said, or what on reflection he meant to convey to his hearers, an official correction is immediately forthcoming. The inner meaning of things is as much a matter of inference as ever: but the superficial facts we know, often in needless detail.

If our familiarity with the present leads us to expect the same precision even in intention, much more in reality, in the narratives of former ages, we are greatly mistaken. Before newspapers were

common, the information which reached men in general about current events was scanty, even when correct. Those who were concerned in public affairs knew their own side of them, then as now, but they were far less likely than now to know fully even the surface facts that did not come within their own ken. The number of possible readers being enormously less, there was a correspondingly smaller inducement to cater for them. Writers were few, in the middle ages very frequently monks: they wrote not for the immediate delectation of a public hungry for news, but as a labour of love. They had no critical standard of accuracy, no one to expect them to state the sources of their information. Even if they had wished to check its correctness, they had little or no means of doing so. What wonder if their narratives, even when recording conspicuous events, tend to be scanty and vague. Remote from eyewitness testimony, having little or no experience of the matters they describe, they are inevitably hazy about the details of events of vast national moment.

An excellent illustration of the real vagueness and scantiness of the information given by chroniclers, and of the difficulties which beset historical inquirers who insist on attributing to their language a precision of meaning such as the authors never dreamed of, is afforded by the extant accounts of the battle

of Hastings. Modern historians attempting a full account of the battle have had as materials a number of what may be called contemporary authorities, together with later writers like William of Malmesbury, who may or may not have read or heard similar narratives of which we have now no indication. They differ greatly in details, and are more or less avowedly partisans, Norman or Saxon. Most of them were monks, and there is nothing to show that any one of them had ever seen the field of Hastings, or even a battle elsewhere, though of course it cannot be proved that they had not: indeed few of them use any but vague language about the topography. There is also the Bayeux tapestry, which from the nature of the case can only show personal incidents. Further, certain facts about the battle are well known—Harold's position, which is still easily recognizable in spite of the modifications in the shape of the ground due to the building of Battle Abbey, the mode of fighting of both Normans and Saxons, and the general result. The number of hours during which Harold occupied the position can also be fixed approximately.

Under these conditions, a modern historian can feel confident that an outline narrative, such as might be contained in a page or two, is perfectly correct. If however he is desirous, as every writer will naturally be when dealing with so momentous

an event, of going into detail, what can he safely do? His authorities differ in every possible way: a given detail is recorded by one, is ignored by another, and is inconsistent with some statement made by a third. Anything which is irreconcilable with ascertained facts may of course be rejected, though negative conclusions do not go far towards construction. The historian may also reasonably express his own beliefs, may say that among the original writers *X* appears to him on the whole more trustworthy than *Y*, or that on comparison of all available information he thinks that the course of events was this or that; but no amount of manipulation of the authorities can justify more. It is mere waste of time tacitly to assume that writers like Florence of Worcester or Guy of Amiens meant to be as precise in every statement as a modern staff-officer, and to enter into controversy as to what each word exactly signifies.

It is probable also that some lack of precision in mediaeval narratives is due, not so much to any vagueness in the writer's knowledge, as to want of a sufficient choice of discriminating words. Of this too an illustration is most readily furnished from an account of a battle, because physical facts can occasionally be compared with a chronicler's description of them. For instance, all accounts agree as to the Black Prince's position at Poitiers. He

posted his archers behind a hedge at the foot of a slope, in the middle of which there was an opening giving access to the higher ground behind: and in front of the hedge there was a depression which the best of the contemporary chroniclers describes as a *profunda vallis*. Those fully acquainted with the ground have no hesitation in identifying the slope, though the hedge has disappeared: but the *profunda vallis* is merely the slight channel made by the overflow from a pond. There is not the slightest reason for charging Baker of Swinbrook with wilful exaggeration: he knew of a hollow which helped the Black Prince, and used the word which occurred to him. So again, if any one will compare for himself the battle-field of Tewkesbury with the narrative written by an eyewitness who was with Edward IV, he will find a similar discrepancy between the words used in the *Arrivall of King Edward* and the actual features of the ground where the hardest fighting took place. It is of course only here and there that we are accidentally enabled to test the language of chroniclers. If the best of them are found to be thus wanting in exactness, common sense dictates bearing this in mind, when we are weighing the evidential value of statements which we have no such means of testing.

The assumption that historical writers intend to be more precise than is in fact the case, leads after

all to no greater mistake than filling in the details of an historical picture more fully than is justifiable. At worst it may lead to unprofitable controversy as to what this or that writer really meant, or to mistaken judgement about facts through undue reliance on one author or undue disparagement of another. The other error, of interpreting the past by the ideas of the present, will probably not lead to false conclusions in matters of fact, though even this is possible. For instance, it is a recognized and perfectly reasonable maxim in interpreting state papers, and declarations of any kind made by a man in authority, that no one will accuse himself untruly. If he says that he has done a particular thing, which reflects discredit upon the doer, it may be fairly assumed that the statement is true, though the motive for making it may be a bad one, such as to conceal a worse act of wrong. It is necessary however, before applying this maxim, to remember that the moral standpoint of his age or country may not be the same as ours. Charles IX of France asserted that he ordered the massacre of St. Bartholomew. There were plenty of contemporaries who regarded it, not with the horror with which the present age contemplates it, as indeed contemporary England did, but as a grand stroke of vengeance against enemies who deserved no mercy. There seems no real doubt that Charles IX's

assertion was false: whether he was trying to win credit with the fanatics, or to repudiate the apparent weakness of allowing so important a thing to be done without his privity, does not matter. The point is that the massacre was not in his eyes an atrocious wickedness, and that therefore the maxim that no man will untruly criminate himself does not apply.

Interpreting the past by the ideas of the present is, however, sure to pervert our judgement as to motives and character. We have to guard against it first on our own account: century by century knowledge accumulates, and the standard of morality changes. We cannot possibly estimate rightly the performances of the maritime explorers in the sixteenth century, unless we can realize the limitations of their knowledge. A comparison of the maps in Hakluyt's *Voyages* with those now available will enable us to see what they knew, what conjectures they based on it, what courage was necessary to face unknown dangers, how far their failures were their own fault. Slavery is indefensible according to modern civilization: any moral judgement of the ancient world would be worthless which antedated this condemnation by two or three thousand years, just as political judgement as to the merits and demerits of democracy would be worthless which left out of sight the amount of the work of

daily life done by slaves in ancient Athens. Piracy is a capital crime now by the laws of all civilized states: but the writers who glibly pronounce Drake and Hawkins to have been no better than pirates are ignoring the enormous difference between the Elizabethan age and our own as to the lawful limits of maritime warfare. International law now declares the sea, beyond a fixed distance from the shore, to be free and open to all nations: but we cannot therefore say that Grotius was setting out a truism in his *Mare Liberum*, or that the ancient English claim to dominion over the 'four seas' was theoretically untenable, though it may have been useless trouble to assert it. Religious persecution is now out of the question: but we cannot therefore pronounce every mediaeval persecutor, who honestly believed that he was killing the body to save the soul, to have been a fiend in human form. We cannot even condemn off-hand the rulers who acted on the principle common to all Christian sects in the sixteenth century—*Cuius regio, eius et religio.*

Similarly we must note and allow for the same tendency in writers of past ages. The mediaeval range of ideas was indeed so limited that they could hardly help interpreting the past by means of what they themselves believed, and were taught to deem permanent, if not of divine institution. Nothing can be much more grotesque to our minds than the

plea derived from the dominant feudalism in support of the Pope's claim to supremacy over the crusaders' kingdom of Jerusalem. Jesus Christ, being a descendant of David, was his heir and *de jure* king of the Holy Land: therefore St. Peter as Christ's representative was so also: therefore the Pope, as St. Peter's successor in the see of Rome, was the feudal suzerain to whom the king chosen by the crusaders owed homage. It would be needless to point out the flaws in this preposterous argument: but it would also be unreasonable to assume that men of the twelfth century were not sincere in advancing it. The ideas represented in it were to their minds part of the necessary and permanent order of things, and they read them into the history of the distant past.

It is no uncommon thing to find it stated in a text-book of English history that such and such a king was a usurper. Possibly the writer may be using the term vaguely, meaning no more than that the prince in question obtained the crown by force, or by other means morally discreditable. More probably he means that the so-called usurper was not the person who would have been entitled to reign under the laws now in force as to succession to the crown: and he tacitly assumes that those laws were in force when John, or Henry IV, or Henry VII, became king. Of course the facts,

strictly so called, are not disputed. John did become king, without an effort being made to get his youthful nephew preferred: Henry IV did take the crown as the result of a revolution: Henry VII did head a successful campaign against Richard III. The question is what interpretation to put on these facts, what judgement to pass on the actors, or on the nation which acquiesced in these and other irregular transferences of the crown. No one can do this fairly if he reads into past centuries the perfectly definite statutory rule of succession under which we have lived for 200 years. He must acquaint himself with the successive stages, both of formal usage, from the Saxon theory of election down to the complete parliamentary definition of the Act of Settlement, and also of prevalent sentiments, such as that of divine right in the seventeenth century, which from time to time animated whole sections of the nation, and placed them in hostility to the existing order of things.

More complicated still is the question of the claims of Edward I over Scotland: for there the modern inquirer has not only to beware of judging the transactions of the thirteenth century by the standards of the twentieth; he has also to remember that the men of the thirteenth century were imbued with the ideas of their own age, and assumed that they had always been dominant. The full-blown

feudal relation between suzerain and vassal was thoroughly understood, and it was tacitly assumed that no other could exist. Edward, like all his predecessors, considered that he had rights over Scotland: it was inevitable that he should take it for granted that he had the same feudal supremacy which he acknowledged the French king to enjoy over himself in respect of Guienne. The Scots denied the validity of his claim: it was inevitable that they should under the circumstances declare that he had no rights at all. It matters not whether Edward was or was not perfectly straightforward, whether the Scottish leaders were patriotic or self-seeking. The essential thing to bear in mind, if we would understand the controversy and judge it fairly, is that the English claims over Scotland were centuries old. They dated from times long before the full development of feudalism, and therefore might be valid without involving complete feudal vassalage. The facts about these relations may be obscure, and are more or less disputed still: but we might as reasonably be guided by modern theories of nationality, as forget how entirely feudal ideas dominated the minds of Edward I and his contemporaries.

CHAPTER IX

HISTORICAL GENERALIZATIONS

It is probably true that the first consideration with historical writers nowadays is to discover and state fully the facts relating to the matters which they have in hand. Historians may of course make mistakes of various kinds, and they will seldom be entirely free from any prepossessions, but they rarely write as partisans. They may strive to interpret the facts so as to show in a favourable light the nation or creed or political party to which their own sympathies are attracted, or so as to make the worst of their opponents: but the facts themselves they intend to state correctly. That this was by no means always the case is notorious. Many historians of the past were somewhat unscrupulous advocates, not merely making the strongest case possible for or against a particular person or cause, but ignoring inconvenient facts. The change which has come over the historical spirit is undoubted and most salutary. Possibly it may be due in part to the wider range of research and the greater facilities for carrying it on, which imply that, a larger number of persons being conversant with

a given set of facts, there is a greater probability of any misuse of them being detected.

Nevertheless, essential as it may be that truth should be the primary object of the historian, his task does not end there. History would be of very little interest or value if the writer limited himself to a mere statement of what his judgement pronounces to be ascertained facts, or even to what he believes to be probably true. He will also try to give his readers a living picture of the past, and therewith the lessons that it suggests for the present and the future, to present not merely the events but their significance. This however implies his having first formed a clear judgement as to the facts. These are as it were the dry bones which he will proceed to clothe with flesh. And just as the skeleton, completely as it may be concealed from outward view, is indispensable in order that an animal should live and move, so historical theory can have no vitality unless it is based on a solid substratum of ascertained fact. Hence the work of the historian divides itself into two stages. First he has to ascertain the facts, secondly to interpret them. The first stage is mainly a matter of evidence: he must scrutinize and compare the available sources of information, and judge from them as to the alleged facts. Some of them he may class as certain —matters so notorious that it is practically im-

possible that there can be any mistake about them. Others he will accept as in his judgement true, while admitting that another mind may form a different opinion. Others he will class as doubtful, because the authority for them seems to him unsatisfactory in the face of contrary statements or inherent improbability. Out of the whole he evolves a continuous narrative, which he sets forth as in his opinion true, though this part or that may be admittedly uncertain. The second stage requires no longer the judicial faculty only, but insight, even imagination, to suggest the reasons why things happened, the motives that swayed the chief actors in events, the influences that caused this or that drift of opinion or of feeling. In order to interest readers in men of the past, for admiration or the reverse, for example or for warning, he must strive to depict their character, as he infers it from their actions or words. In order that the present time may benefit by lessons from the past, he must trace out the causes and the effects of specific events, all of which may be highly complicated and very gradual in their operation. And since all this is essentially a matter of opinion, of conjecture (if that word may be used with no disparaging sense), it is all the more necessary that the historian should make sure of his evidence, should take care that the foundations on which he is going to raise his super-

structure are as solid as under the circumstances is possible.

For this second stage it is reasonable to assume that all the materials are in writing. The historian has made up his mind about his direct authorities, those who wrote in order to place matters on record. He has also investigated the indirect sources of information, and noted the inferences to be drawn from them in support or correction of the direct narratives. His evidence is ready: how is he going to use it? The principles that should guide him will always be the same: but the conditions vary somewhat according as he is or is not dealing with a modern subject. In treating of ancient or mediaeval history he can easily be sure that he has before him all available materials: but he may also feel that his judgement must be hesitating, and may be wrong, for lack of further information which is not, and probably now never will be, forthcoming. For modern affairs on the other hand, while it may require much trouble to marshal all the facts, he can be pretty certain that everything capable of being recorded has been committed to writing, and is available, thanks largely to printing, in authentic form.

It is difficult for the modern world to realize the conditions of ages when comparatively little was written down. Nowadays practically everything is

committed to writing. Every business transaction, in the widest sense of the word, is sure to be in writing, and in many cases cannot otherwise be legally enforced. An executive officer expects written instructions from the government that he is serving, and sends written reports of what he has done. Diplomatic correspondence between states is sooner or later committed to writing, even if the first tentative overtures are made orally. Accidents may happen, but the general presumption is that in all affairs, public or private, everything that has any permanent effect will have been written down, and also that the documents are preserved in the proper place, and will be produced at need. Indeed we may go further, and assume that everything of public interest will sooner or later be printed and published. In the ancient or mediaeval world comparatively little was written, and it was more or less a matter of chance what writings were preserved, beyond obvious things like the text of a law. The change has come since the invention of printing, which accompanied and indeed rendered possible the revival of learning and the simultaneous spread of education, when the middle ages were drawing to an end.

The invention of printing has made a vast difference to the first part of the historian's business, the ascertaining of facts, especially since newspapers

have become common. The change has perhaps not lightened his labours, but it has greatly affected their nature. For dealing with any ancient or mediaeval subject, the materials available are probably scanty: and the most frequently recurring difficulty is that of determining how much credence is to be given to statements made, when there is seldom the opportunity of comparing the accounts of independent writers. In the modern world the historian may suffer from a superabundance of materials: he may have great trouble in forming a clear judgement from a mass of narratives describing the same event from different points of view, some perhaps with obvious partiality. But the bulk of the information as to the facts which the historian needs as the basis of his narrative requires no sifting whatever, and no time need be expended on verifying it. For instance, he has on record in the newspapers every detail concerning the passing of a given bill through Parliament. He knows the date of its introduction, the reasons adduced for it by the minister in charge of the measure, the objections urged by hostile critics, in Parliament and in the press, the amendments introduced, the final form in which it received the royal assent. He may think the arguments for or against it sophistical or inadequate, he may even think that they were meant to conceal or misrepresent the

true mind of the speakers: but he cannot possibly doubt that they were in fact used. All matters of general interest are similarly public property, whether happening at home or abroad—the death of a great personage, the conclusion of a treaty, the completion of a new enterprise, a new scientific discovery. Of course there are exceptions: every government is bound to keep secret pending negotiations with a foreign power, and will naturally not reveal prematurely its own purposes. Every government also does wisely if it exercises efficient control in war time over the information made public as to its armed forces. But even these apparent exceptions amount to little more than temporary delay until circumstances allow publicity. The real motives actuating statesmen, the underground currents which produce a change in public opinions or beliefs, remain matters of inference on which the historian must exercise his judgement as much as ever, but the actual facts may be said to be known. To put it more accurately, the records of them are so full and so multifarious that belief in their having happened amounts to practical certainty.

Facts are of course of two classes—isolated things which are said to have happened once for all, and habitual actions. Concerning the former the historian arrives at his judgement, positive or negative, confident or hesitating, according to the nature and

amount of the testimony available concerning each specific fact. He accepts, for instance, as certain the statement that the battle of Flodden was fought on 9th September, 1513: he rejects the rumour afterwards set abroad for interested reasons, that James IV survived the defeat, but merely because the evidence in favour of a highly improbable statement seems to him worthless, not because the story is absolutely impossible. When it is a question of habitual things, he will be satisfied with less cogent evidence, largely because of the great improbability that a number of witnesses, whatever the individual value of each, should all have concurred in stating what was not true. At the same time he may well hesitate in his judgement as to the extent of the custom, still more as to the reasons which led to its adoption. No inquirer, for instance, would entirely disbelieve that human sacrifices were offered by the Druids, but very few would form more than a hesitating conjecture as to the frequency or the motive of such acts.

The essential difference between scientific and historical investigation is, as has been already pointed out, that in the former it is almost always possible to verify, in the latter it is not. Not only can the inquirer satisfy himself by adequate means of the truth (or otherwise) of an alleged scientific fact: he can further judge by independent experi-

ment or observation, as to whether the suggested cause of the phenomenon is the real one. A skilful chemist or physiologist can by judiciously varying his experiments bring into operation what Mill calls the Method of Difference, which is conclusive when applicable at all. If he discovers that the phenomenon under observation occurs when a certain influence is operating, but fails to occur when, other things remaining unchanged, that influence is withdrawn, he can feel sure that the influence in question is the cause that he is seeking. No such resource is open to the historical inquirer. Even if he is satisfied as to the facts, he can use no experimental methods to elicit their meaning. He may reasonably say—a given thing has been done, its tendency will be to produce a given effect: or—a certain thing is happening, something which happened in the past would have tended to bring it about: but he cannot go further. If he can venture to maintain, as in many cases he reasonably may, that the relation of cause and effect exists between them, he can practically never be justified in asserting that the prior phenomenon is the sole cause of the later one.

For instance, a tax upon a given article of consumption is increased or diminished. The prima facie presumption is perfectly reasonable, first that the cost of the article to the consumer will be pro-

portionately increased or diminished, secondly that the higher or lower price will tend to a decrease or increase in the total amount of the article consumed. Such an inference is more than reasonable, it is cogent on condition that everything else remains unchanged, but on no other assumption: for the change in the tax is only one out of many elements which combine to fix the cost of the article. A few years ago a small tax on imported corn was levied as a temporary expedient during the Boer war. Its remission did not in fact seem to affect the price of corn at all, because it happened to coincide with economic conditions that told in the opposite direction. Or again, suppose a visible stream of emigration away from a given country: it is perfectly reasonable to point to bad laws or corrupt administration, and to argue that their natural effect would be to engender discontent, and thus to stimulate emigration. But however valid such a presumption may be, we cannot state the case the other way, and say that the fact that emigrants are leaving a country proves it to be ill-governed.

In all matters where conclusive experiment is impossible, inquirers are bound to be on their guard against the fallacy of inferring that because a particular phenomenon follows on another, it is the effect of it. *Post hoc* is not necessarily *propter hoc*. Even a physician, though he well knows in

a general way the properties of a drug which he administers to a patient, may well doubt whether symptoms which he observes are due to it or not. *A fortiori* the historian, who has to deal with the infinite complexity of human affairs, with every possible variety of motive influencing men's conduct, can only tentatively connect cause and effect.

An excellent illustration is furnished by the controversy which attracts the most attention in the present state of English politics. Two generations ago England adopted Free Trade, and her wealth has increased enormously since that date. Our present industrial conditions are by no means altogether satisfactory, and remedies for the existing evils are much needed. One political party believes that they are to be found in a reconstitution of our fiscal system; the other party declares that, whatever is done, our fiscal system must not be touched. It would of course be irrelevant to enter into the merits of the question: but the arguments chiefly urged by the extreme partisans on both sides are saturated with the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy. The Cobdenites maintain that Free Trade has been the cause of all the subsequent industrial prosperity. The tariff reformers point to the great recent growth in the commercial wealth of two protectionist countries, our chief industrial rivals, and argue that therefore England ought to make changes in the

direction of a protectionist policy. The first argument ignores every other change that has come over the industrial world, and assumes that the prosperity of England since the adoption of Free Trade has been entirely due to that one cause: and those who employ it also refuse to admit the possibility of new conditions arising or having arisen. The other party are guilty of the same fallacy when they argue that the great industrial development of Germany and the United States is due solely to protection, whereas many other influences have been operating simultaneously. And they proceed like their opponents to a further fallacy, in maintaining that England ought to follow the example of her rivals, ignoring the various conditions which differentiate her from them. It does not follow that there is no force in the arguments on either side: on the contrary, both are worthy of serious consideration. Moreover many other considerations can be, and in fact are, urged on both sides. None the less the extremists, who leave out of sight every consideration but the one about which they care most, are guilty of a fallacy in assuming that everything which ensues on a given event is due to its influence.

Plenty of other illustrations might be cited, till we come down to the famous notion that the building of Tenterden steeple caused the formation of the

Goodwin Sands. But it needs no instances to show that, in historical matters especially, while it is very easy to note the *post hoc*, it is never safe to affirm *propter hoc*, except in the sense that the earlier event was calculated to cause the later, and may therefore be reasonably assumed at least to have contributed greatly towards bringing it about.

Historians have before now railed at every attempt to break up history into sections: to separate ancient history from modern, for instance, is, they say, impossible, since no dividing line can be drawn which is not arbitrary. This is stating the case in a manner which obscures the real difficulty that is inseparable from historical inquiry, as soon as it goes beyond trying to register facts. It is no doubt true that whenever, and for whatever purpose, a dividing line is drawn, there are pretty sure to be doubtful cases on each side of it. Every examiner has felt, when required to draw a line separating first class and second, or passing and failure, that the difference between those who have just reached the higher standard and those who have just fallen short of it is not in fact great, and that a very slight change of conditions might have affected the fate of any one of them. Every law court is familiar with doubtful cases: a very little more or less decides whether a given document is or is not technically libellous, whether a principal

has or has not empowered an agent to bind him in a particular transaction, whether a given act of homicide is legally murder or manslaughter. In all such matters as these a decision has to be made in each case on the judge's responsibility, and there is an end of it. The analogous difficulty in respect of history really lies much deeper, though it is not seriously felt so long as the inquirer is merely collecting and recording facts. A student will from the nature of the case devote his attention mainly to this or that period or aspect of history. But whatever individuals may do, history as a whole is continuous, like time and space, and real dividing lines cannot be drawn.

Every one is familiar with the obviously true saying that, as the Greek dramatist phrased it, the Gods themselves cannot make a thing once done to be as if it had never taken place. Its truth can be traced even in the physical world, and still more clearly in all human affairs. Doubtless the permanent consequences of most actions are so slight as to be negligible. But it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that all actions of which history is likely to take cognizance have traceable consequences. They alter the condition of things to a greater or less degree, and they alter it permanently. Even if the acts themselves can be and are afterwards reversed, the influence that they have

exerted meanwhile has made its mark on the human society concerned. A discovery is made or a law is passed, which has the effect of stimulating a particular industry. This means either an increase of population, perhaps by immigration, or a diversion of labour from other pursuits. A later discovery greatly modifies the conditions arising out of the first, or the law is for some reason repealed. But the effects already produced are not thereby annihilated: they have modified the industrial conditions of the country for all time. A war breaks out between two neighbouring nations. If it proves decisive, it will have altered the political equilibrium of the world, to a greater or less degree according to the importance of the states concerned, but certainly to some extent: and it probably leaves behind it the seeds of future conflict. If it proves uneventful, and peace is quickly made, the traces of destruction on the common frontier may be soon obliterated, but there is no calculating the difference made to either country by the lives lost. Instances need not be multiplied: the historical inquirer, seeking to trace out the consequences of anything that has happened in the past, is bound to admit that theoretically at least they are endless.

Moreover, whatever influences are at work operate simultaneously from the nature of the case; from which it follows that, even if they are observed, the

amount of their effect cannot be measured. When a variety of forces are brought to bear on a solid body, its resultant motion can be calculated accurately if we know the exact strength of each force and the exact direction in which it is operating, but not if any one of the requisite data is unknown. In historical inquiries it is not too much to say that none of the data are exactly ascertainable. We perceive the effect, say that a particular nation has developed certain qualities and institutions, and has achieved a certain position in the world. We can discern that certain causes have been in operation, which might reasonably be expected to exert each its own influence. We can discern that other causes have also been in operation, which might reasonably be expected more or less to counteract or to deflect the movement set going by the former set of causes. What we cannot do is so completely to disentangle them from each other, as to estimate even approximately the exact force of each. The historian has a right to say—certain things are known to have happened, or to be happening : certain other things are known to have happened in the past, and they in my judgement were instrumental in bringing about the later conditions. If he states the case as if there were anything like certainty, he is merely dogmatizing.

Nothing is more reasonable than to point out the

various circumstances which have formed the environment, for instance, of the British nation, and to say generally that they have made it what it is. The races which have successively come to inhabit this island had each its own characteristics, its inheritance of ideas or institutions. Our climate and the nature of our mineral wealth, our insularity, our position on the globe, have all been potent elements in forming the England of to-day. But how potent has each item of our environment been? This is a question which we cannot attempt to answer, and the impossibility is brought home to us if we try to picture the effect had any of the conditions been altered. What if the Norman Conquest had not come just when the ground had been prepared for it by the Danish kings? What if the Reformation had not come when a virtual despotism had supplanted the old feudal régime? What if Cromwell had lived to old age? It is reasonable to say that the germs of our institutions were brought hither by the Angle and Saxon invaders, and to argue that their development into their present form was due to certain conditions, in the absence of which the germs would have perished or grown up very differently. Even so we cannot affirm that no other influences were at work. Our evidence cannot be conclusive, however good it may be as the basis for theories avowedly conjectural.

Prediction as to historical matters in the future would appear at first sight to be even more hazardous than speculation as to cause and effect in the past. Both however are based on the same sort of generalizations, and are legitimate within the same limits. Both assume a certain amount of uniformity in human nature, which has to be corrected by observation as to the diverse tendencies developed in different races, or under different political or climatic conditions. The authors of both must admit that their inferences, however reasonable on the average, are liable to prove incorrect in specific instances. It is not every race that, dwelling on the sea-coast, has developed maritime aptitudes: the opportunity is essential, but does not attract all equally. If we could imagine a new continent rising out of the Pacific Ocean, and occupied by men of Anglo-Saxon race, it would be a fair presumption that they would develop on the same political lines as their kindred in North America and Australia, but circumstances might be too strong for them. Speculation as to the future is as legitimate as inquiry into the past. It is in fact the one way in which historical inquiry can be of practical, as distinguished from purely intellectual, utility. But this is only acceptable with the proviso that historical generalization is to be treated as what it really is, not exalted into a science.

There is thus an essential difference between the first and the second stage of historical investigation. When we are inquiring into facts, we can reach virtual certainty as to a good many. For some the evidence may be deemed conclusive; for others, though the testimony is not equally strong, yet the absence of contradiction and general probability may justify almost equal confidence. As to other alleged facts, we may form judgements with any degree of doubtfulness. Each however stands by itself: each furnishes a contribution of greater or less value to the mass which has to be estimated for the second purpose, that of drawing inferences from the facts. In doing the latter, on the contrary, we are bound to begin with general hypotheses, such as—that like causes will produce like events, or that men will act as best suits their own interests as they understand them, or that men intend the natural consequences of their acts. Such hypotheses are obviously true in a sense, that is to say they hold good unless countervailing influences of some sort have existed: but they have, if the phrase may be allowed, no specific validity; there is no feeling sure that they will hold good in any particular instance. All that the historian can do, in cases where such general theories fail him, is to trace the other influences operating in each instance, and so work his way towards an explanation of the

facts before him. Just as his coherent narrative is built up out of the facts which his authorities bring to his notice, controlled by his own judgement as to the credibility or relation of these several facts, so will his exposition of the meaning of the narrative be evolved by considering the extent to which general theories are applicable to explain it. He may very possibly arrive at equally confident beliefs, but he will have started from the other end.

When it comes to passing judgement on historical personages, or events, the case is again somewhat altered. Assuming that the facts are clear, proximity to an event gives no extra weight to an opinion as to its moral import. A contemporary original authority has a perfect right to his judgement on a question of right and wrong: but it is of course equally open to other people to dissent from the principles on which he bases it. It is no doubt true that moral standards are not invariable: the contemporary may have been expressing the sentiment of his age, though opinions have changed since. In such a case we have some explanation of the act which we think wrongful, some reason for not condemning too harshly the men who perpetrated it, but none for reversing our judgement. The murder of Julius Caesar is nowadays regarded as an unjustifiable act by all save a few fanatics. But our condemnation of the deed itself is not

affected, is not rendered in any way less permanently sound, because we know that many generally estimable men of Caesar's time thought it heroic. Again, it is quite reasonable that very different views should be held on the abstract political question whether, if a king infringes the recognized rights of his subjects, they are or are not justified in resorting to force for redress of their grievances. Assuming that the question of fact is settled, whether or not the subjects of Charles I had constitutional rights that he infringed, the verdict of the present day, as to the right and wrong involved, is as authoritative as the judgement of contemporaries, more so in fact, because we are removed by many generations from the passions of a troubled time.

Again, judgement as to the general character of individuals who figure in history must needs be far less definite, far less confident, than when we are dealing with single events, however well we may know the specific facts of their lives. Every one for instance knows that Napoleon made himself emperor and died a captive: and those who care to master the details of his astonishing career can learn them with ease and completeness. Yet probably no two competent judges would exactly agree in their estimate of his equally astonishing character, still less as to the precise manner in which the general circumstances that led to the

French Revolution, and the force of his personality, co-operated towards the evolution of France as she is. So too no one can doubt that Mohammed founded a new and lasting religion, and thereby modified the whole subsequent history of mankind. But was he sincere enthusiast, or conscious impostor, or a mixture of the two, and whence did he derive the materials for his new creed? Answers to these questions may be given with more or less confidence, but they are only conjectural inferences from the known facts. This of course does not mean that the portraying of historical characters is wasted labour: on the contrary, it is a task in which historians have generally delighted, and have achieved conspicuous literary success. Such characters may be well thought out, capable of being sustained by reasonable, even cogent argument: but none the less is it impossible that they should attain, except in very rare cases, to the virtual certainty with which we can accept many specific facts.

When we have formed an estimate of the character of an historical personage, we are always more or less inclined to disbelieve statements that come to our knowledge which conflict with that estimate. Within certain limits this is reasonable enough. If the new alleged facts are ill-attested, the fact that they are at variance with the general character

of the person concerning whom they are told, may go far to justify our treating them as incredible. It falls under the general rule that the improbability of a statement is one of the considerations which must be weighed in judging whether to accept or to reject it. We may even go a step further, and refuse to believe any evidence whatever of an alleged action, which is inconsistent with the thoroughly well established character of the personage who is said to have performed it. The author of the story must be wrong, either misinformed or wilfully inventing. Who for instance would hesitate to reject a story, however attested, of an act of selfish dishonesty perpetrated by George Washington? At the same time we need to guard against arguing in a circle. We form our estimate of an historical personage from his recorded actions: if new actions of his come to light, they are new elements in the calculation, which must be revised accordingly, assuming that having duly weighed all considerations we are satisfied of the correctness of the new facts. And after all human nature is so complex that the improbable may easily prove true. We occasionally encounter in daily life men habitually selfish and vicious, doing noble actions of which we should *a priori* have deemed them incapable, and the best of men yielding to temptations against which we should have supposed them proof.

And the same thing holds good of historical personages, the only difference being that in respect of the latter our knowledge is usually less direct, and the information on which our judgement is based less full, so that there is more room for considering the probability of the case.

To sum up briefly the results of our investigation of historical evidence. There is no such thing as historical knowledge in the strictest sense of the word, beyond the very few things of which our own senses have been cognizant. It is, strictly speaking, belief based on the testimony of others: and that belief may be of any degree, from such complete confidence that it is virtually equivalent to certainty downwards. First of all the inquirer will sift his evidence in conformity with acknowledged principles, but always remembering that in the last resort the question before him is the personal one—do I or do I not believe? He is fully justified not only in forming his own conclusions, but in arguing in favour of them, provided that he bears in mind the legitimacy of other minds arriving at different conclusions. Secondly, when he has accumulated his facts, he will investigate relations of cause and effect, the rightfulness or expediency of different courses of action, the characters of the men who have made history. The more clearly he can formulate his views, the more forcibly he can

advocate them, the better for his readers, provided always that he bears in mind the impossibility of so disentangling human affairs as to measure the exact causes which alone have led up to any given event, or the exact results which have followed solely from its having happened.

INDEX OF HISTORICAL ILLUSTRATIONS

Africa, circumnavigation of, by Phoenicians, 93.
Aigues Mortes, physical changes at, 146.
Alps, now accurately mapped, 143.
Anonymous writings, 37.
Arc de Triomphe at Paris, 103.
Arthur, traditions of king, 78.
Assassinations, political, 23.
Assyrian inscriptions and Old Testament, 100.

Baker of Swinbrook's chronicle, 38, 175, 188.
Besançon, Diet of, 36 n.
Bill of Rights, preamble to, 111.
Bismarck, Life of, 125.
Borgia poisonings, 133.
Borodino, hour at which battle of, began, 44.

Caesar, murder of, 215.
Casket letters, 126 sq.
Chambray, an eyewitness historian, 55.
Charles I, death of, 24.
—, relation to his subjects, 215.
Charles V, emperor, abdication of, 166.
Charles IX and massacre of St. Bartholomew, 189.
Cicero on Roman funeral orations, 64.
Clarendon, a statesman historian, 51.
Coldstream Guards, 112.
Comines, a statesman historian, 52.
Cornewall Lewis on nature of evidence, 48.
— on conjectured sources of early Roman history, 63.
Corpus Inscriptionum, 33.
Crecy, cannon at battle of, 175.
Crusades, first preachers of, 85.

Danish invasions of England, 146.
Darwin's *Origin of Species*, 149.
Decretals, False, 136.
Dickens on abuses in workhouses, 150.
Difficilior lectio, 165.
Diplomatic dispatches, possibly drafted only and not sent, 115.
Domesday Book, 102, 113.
Doubtful readings rarely important historically, 34.
Druids and human sacrifice, 202.
Dunbar, battle of, 176.

Edward I and his claims on Scotland, 193.
Eikon Basiliké, 137.
Exodus not mentioned in inscriptions, 105.

Fabii at the Cremera, 65.
Faerie Queene, 150.
Fire of London, monument of, 103.
Flodden, battle of, and fate of James IV, 202.
Frederick Barbarossa, legend about, 70, 157.
Free Trade controversy, 205.
Freeman's description of Hastings position, 145.
French concealment of reverses in 1870, 120.

Gauls, burning of Rome by, 66.
— passed the western Alps, 142.
Gospels differ in details, 44.
Grotius' *Mare Liberum*, 191.
Gulliver's Travels, 149.
Gustavus Adolphus' death at Lützen, 77.

Hakluyt's *Voyages*, 190.
Hallam on historical perspective, 58.
Hannibal's passage of the Alps, 140 sq.
Hardwicke's memoirs, 125.
Hastings, chroniclers on battle of, 186.
—, Harold's position at, 145.
Herodotus as an authority, 93.
Homeric poems, 76, 151.
Horatii and Curiatii, 181.
Horatius at the bridge, 65, 173.
Hume on miracles, 168.

Inscriptions at Mycenae and Knossos, 154.
— collated with Old Testament, 104.
— on pyramids, 154.
— of Roman Empire, 106.
Itineraries of mediaeval sovereigns, 167.

Juvenal on Roman society, 150.

'King's Cabinet opened,' 124.
Kingly period at Rome, 67.

Lake-dwellings, 154.
Lake Regillus, battle of, 65.
Langlois' and Seignobos' *Etudes Historiques*, 98.
Lazarus and his sisters in Gaul, 148 n.
Literature of reign of Charles II, 150.
Livy as non-contemporary authority, 66.
— on Hannibal's passage of the Alps, 141.
Lycurgus, laws of, 109.

Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*, 65.
Machiavelli as a statesman historian, 52.
Malojaroslavetz, battle of, 123.
Man with Iron Mask, 163.
Manoa, the fabulous city of, 92.
Mary Stuart and the murder of Darnley, 24.
— and the Casket letters, 126.
Metternich's autobiography, 125.
Mexican history as told by Spaniards, 75.
Mill's Method of Difference, 203.
Miracles, 168.
Mohammed, unexpected rise of, 161.
—, his character, 216,

Monasteries, dissolution of, 114.
Moscow, burning of, 89.

Napier as an eyewitness historian, 54.
Napoleon his own advocate, 87.
—, his character, 215.
—, his diplomatic assertions, 115.
—, his dispatch from the Berezina, 120.
—, his expedition to Egypt, 172.

Old Testament, history collated with inscriptions, 100, 104.
—, authorship of books, 135.
Originals or copies, 36.
Ossian, poems of, 133.

Papacy, inscriptions to support claims of, 107.
—, claims of over Palestine, 192.
Pentateuch, language of, 40.
Phalaris, Epistles of, 133.
Pitt, William, the younger, 85.
Poictiers, battle of, 188.
Polybius on Hannibal's passage of Alps, 141.
Pontius Pilate, legend of his fate, 157.
Poole harbour, 146.

Robin Hood ballads, 76.
Roger de Coverley, 150.
Rolls series, 34.
Rome burned by Gauls, 66.
—, patricians *v.* plebeians at, 26.
—, sources of early history, 63 sq.
Rostopchin, Count, 90.
Roundway Down, battle of, 73, 157.
Rousseau's *Contrat Social*, 149.

St. Bartholomew, massacre of, 179.
Schwedenstein, 77.
Scipio and Hannibal, 142.
Shakespeare controversy, 39, 161.
Ship-money, 112.
'Sibyl's Well' in *Marmion*, 77 n.
Smollett and life in the navy, 150.
Speech-writing a recognized practice among ancient historians, 134.
Stonehenge, 154.
Strafford, attainder of, 112.
— and Pym, 60.

Tacitus, speeches in, 135.
Technical terms in mediaeval documents, 36.
Tewkesbury, battle of, 188.
Thales, said to have predicted an eclipse, 147.
Thermopylae, physical changes at, 146.
Thucydides as an authority, 152.
—, speeches in, 134.
Twelve Tables, 69.

Usurpers in England, 192.

Vatican documents, 118.
Venetian *relazioni*, 117.
Victoria, funeral of Queen, 59 n.

Washington, George, 217.
Waterloo, battle of, 25.
William Tell and his statue at Altdorf, 156.
Wolf and twins, figure of, in Capitol, 156.

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